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# A Reporter at Large


- [At Qatar's World Cup, Where Politics and Pleasure Collide]

# At Qatar’s World Cup, Where Politics and Pleasure Collide

The first ten days were soccer as it is, rather than as you want it to be.

By Sam Knight




A smiling ghost came up through the floor. La’eeb, the mascot of this year’s World Cup, in Qatar, is a bodiless figure in a thobe, the white gown favored by the men of the Arabian Peninsula. He materialized during the tournament’s opening ceremony, sometime after Morgan Freeman asked Ghanim al-Muftah, a Qatari YouTuber, who was born without legs, whether he was welcome in the country—he was—and before Jung Kook, of the Korean boy band BTS, sent the mostly Qatari crowd into a conservative mode of ecstasy. La’eeb wafted across a spotlighted plain populated by previous mascots, going all the way back to World Cup Willie, a Teddy-bear lion used by England fourteen tournaments ago. For soccer fans, each iteration of the World Cup, which was first staged in Uruguay, in 1930, carries immediate associations: Pavarotti singing “Nessun Dorma” in Italy, in 1990; the vuvuzelas of South Africa, in 2010. The Qatari edition was born in corruption, paid for with hydrocarbons, and built on the labor of hundreds of thousands of workers, imported from the Global South and frequently

abused in one of the smallest and richest countries on earth. According to *FIFA*, which owns the World Cup, La'eeb was from "a parallel mascot-verse that is indescribable." Everyone was encouraged to find his or her own meaning, even if that meaning was death.

The first ten days of the World Cup in Qatar were soccer as it is, rather than as you want it to be. It was venal, closed, and transactional. I saw some terrific goals. I drank Coke and paid with my Visa card. I lined up for the Adidas store. Everything was brand new, air-conditioned, and covered in an almost invisible layer of pale desert dust. I was safe and occasionally delighted, most often by the people I met. It was a case of situational ethics, in which the spontaneity and the fellow-feeling of the world's most popular sport were disrupted and modified by the circumstances in which it was played.

When I arrived for the opening match, at Al Bayt Stadium—which stands alone in the desert, a soaring industrial confection of a Bedouin tent—I knelt down to pick a sprig of the perfect grass, just to check if it was real. It smelled of nothing at all. (The turf at the World Cup is a trademarked seashore paspalum imported from the United States; each field is irrigated with ten thousand litres of desalinated water a day.) There was camel shit, and that was real, too. At night, in the capital, Doha, you were never more than ten yards from a crowd marshal, waving a green or a red light stick, showing you where to go. The scores of ongoing games were projected onto the flanks of skyscrapers, which winked across the city. It was like being inside a QR code.

Qatar is smaller than Connecticut. All but three teams were based in Doha, and, unlike at any previous World Cup, it was possible to attend more than one match in a day. The entire world was there, in generally small proportions. I met a Mexican couple on the sparkling new metro, grousing about the lack of beer. "The beer is the atmosphere," one of them said. Canadian fans discussed the rumored electronic surveillance. (The German authorities advised visitors to wipe their phones after using Qatar's Hayya app, which functioned as both a visa and a pass for the tournament.) Welsh supporters were ordered to remove their rainbow-colored bucket hats.




*To host, Qatar underwent a construction boom, during which unknown numbers of migrant workers died.*

Doha is a city of six-lane highways and unwalked sidewalks. There are compounds in every shade of beige. Away from the stadiums and the malls, there was never anybody around, which gave rise to an occasional feeling of going to the World Cup alone. One morning, I tried to find the Dutch team, which was training at a facility on the Qatar University campus. The campus, a vast maze of roads and checkpoints, was closed. (Qatar’s school and university semesters ended early, to make way for the tournament.) No one knew where the team was. Instead, I stopped by Caravan City, a trailer park for fans, where a windswept gravel plain was decorated here and there with simple stone mosaics of flowers. I bumped into Jaime Higuera, from New Jersey, who was staying in a trailer with his brother. The trailer was sweet enough, decorated with paintings of stags. Outside, there was not a soul to be seen. “I’m, like, ‘Are there other people staying here?’ ” Higuera said. “I don’t know.”

*FIFA* awarded Qatar the rights to host the World Cup on December 2, 2010. On the same day, the organization’s executive committee voted to give Russia the 2018 edition. Of the twenty-two men who voted, fifteen were later indicted by American or Swiss prosecutors, banned from soccer, charged by *FIFA*’s ethics committee, or expelled from the International Olympic Committee. External advisers pointed out that Qatar did not have a single suitable stadium, that it was a potential security risk, and that

temperatures in the summer reach a hundred and ten degrees. (The tournament was originally scheduled for June and July.) In the following twelve years, the World Cup catalyzed a breathtaking construction boom in Qatar, which relied overwhelmingly on migrant workers from South Asia. Human-rights organizations reported deaths, poor workplace safety, and misery among unpaid workers, who were trapped in Qatar's unequal immigration system. Gay and trans people expressed shock that the World Cup would be held in a country where homosexual activity and all forms of extramarital sex are punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment. "It's not just sad, it's sick," Thomas Hitzlsperger, a gay former member of the German national team, told the *Guardian*.

On November 8th, twelve days before the tournament began, Sepp Blatter, the former president of *FIFA*, admitted that Qatar had been "a bad choice." His successor, Gianni Infantino, said that it would be the best World Cup ever. He wrote to the thirty-two teams taking part and asked them to focus on soccer, "without handing out moral lessons to the rest of the world."

The day before the opening, Infantino addressed some four hundred reporters in an auditorium in Doha. "Today, I have very strong feelings," he began. "Today I feel Qatari. Today I feel Arab. Today I feel African. Today I feel gay. Today I feel disabled. Today I feel a migrant worker." Infantino recalled his own struggles, as the child of Italian migrants in Switzerland. He was bullied because of something red on his hands. He asked his director of communications what these were called. "*Freckles*," Infantino said. He berated the reporters for not writing more about disabled people. "Nobody cares," he said. He mourned the deaths of African migrants at sea in the Mediterranean, attempting to reach a better life: "Where are we going? Where are we going with our way of working, guys?"

Whatever Infantino was trying to say, it didn't make much more sense than the words of "Tukoh Taka," the insanely catchy anthem of the tournament's Fan Festival, which took place on a shadeless, concrete expanse, not far from Doha's waterfront: "Some say 'football,' some say 'soccer' / Likkle shot go block-a (block-a)." Thank you, Nicki Minaj. Or a TikTok video that circulated showing some England fans, apparently from Liverpool, who were having a good time in Doha—just having a moosh, in their words—on

the lookout for some beer, ending up in a rich Qatari's house and playing with his pet lion.

Abandoned by politicians, who don't like to offend Qatar, which is the world's largest exporter of liquid natural gas, players and coaches had to juggle an impossible multiplex of sports, human rights, and authoritarian capitalism. Gregg Berhalter, the head coach of the United States team, addressed a press conference before the team's first game, against Wales, like a marine colonel trying to explain an air strike on civilians. "We don't necessarily reflect the view of Infantino," he said. A group of European team captains, including England's Harry Kane, who had planned to wear rainbow-colored "One Love" armbands, to show their support for L.G.B.T.Q. rights, changed their minds when they were threatened with yellow cards by *FIFA*. The Iranian players showed their Western counterparts what actual courage looked like, by refusing to sing their national anthem, in solidarity with recent protests against the clerical regime.

The Qataris, to varying degrees, were terrified of the influx. Families installed security cameras and checked their window locks. In the days before the World Cup, social media filled with prayers and stoic messages for the test ahead. "I was, like, 'This is very strange,' because it's the type of stuff you would say or tweet, like, literally, when you're going to war," a young Qatari, whom I will call Ali, told me. (Qatar ranks a hundred and nineteenth out of a hundred and eighty on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, below Ethiopia. In this article, single names are pseudonyms.) Two days before the opening ceremony and the first match, between Qatar and Ecuador, the authorities reneged on an agreement to allow beer to be served at the stadiums. On the day of the game, which Ali was preparing to attend with his siblings, his father announced that his youngest sister wasn't going. "There's this huge fear," Ali said. "My parents always talked about: What if people don't leave—they come here for the World Cup and just, like, start selling drugs or doing whatever?"

After the opening ceremony, I talked with a group of young Qatari men who were hanging out in the stadium concourse. Qatari society is considered the most conservative of the six nations of the Gulf: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar's great rival, the United Arab Emirates. The men almost always wear national dress: an ironed white thobe and a white

headdress kept in place by a black cord called an agal. Women cover their heads and wear the abaya, a long black gown. At a 2019 soccer match between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Saudis teased the Qataris for coming as if dressed for a wedding. Mohammed Hussein, who was twenty-five, seemed preternaturally calm. “This is our culture,” he said. “This is us.” He had never been to a soccer match before.

The teams took to the pitch. “Al Bayt Stadium, the wait is over!” the announcer yelled. Qatar, whose team plays in deep red and is nicknamed the Maroon, has never qualified for a World Cup on merit. (The host country always plays.) The team wasn’t terrible. In 2019, Qatar won the Asian Cup and was ranked fiftieth in the world, only six places below Ecuador. But the Qatari players were nervous. Their passing was scrappy. The ball wouldn’t stick. In the stands, Qatari fans chatted with one another, including with people they didn’t already know—something that rarely happens in public places. “All those rules just kind of disappeared in the stadium,” Ali said.

Ecuador scored two goals in the first thirty-one minutes. The team’s supporters chanted, “*Queremos cerveza!* ” We want beer. Behind the Qatar goal, a bloc of hard-core fans, dressed in maroon T-shirts, kept up an impressive performance of drumming and chanting for the home team. But they weren’t wearing thobes and seemed to have a lot of tattoos. It turned out that they were Lebanese.

At halftime, the Budweiser fridges stood empty and unlabelled. Fans prayed near a Visa-gift-card stand. I came across Garga Umaru, a broad man dressed in a tall straw hat and a long gown in the colors of Cameroon. He was offering to pose for photos with Qatari children. “Cameroon, no problem!” he called out. Speaking quietly, Umaru was skeptical of the host country’s chances. “Qatar is not at the level of the World Cup,” he said. “Football is in the feet.” Umaru said that he was one of about two hundred fans who had been flown in from Cameroon. He wasn’t sure which soccer federation had paid for the trip. Ahmed, a Syrian Palestinian in his twenties, who had grown up in Qatar, was worried about how the team was playing. “The pass accuracy is just horrible,” he said. No host country had ever lost the opening match of a World Cup; Ahmed feared that Qatar might not score a single goal in the tournament. “All the pressure is getting to them,” he said.

Ecuador remained in complete control in the second half. Seats began to empty. Qatari families, who had clapped politely during the first half, made for their Land Cruisers. "In the West, the idea is to say, 'I'm here for you till the end. And I cheer for you,' " a Qatari who left at halftime told me later. "Here, though, the approach, it's more 'Hey! I came all the way here to see you. . . . You should have been playing better than that.' " Ali and his siblings stuck it out until the eighty-second minute. Then they left to beat the traffic.

Nobody knows how many people died building the World Cup. Last year, the *Guardian* reported that sixty-seven hundred and fifty South Asian migrants had died in Qatar since the hosting rights were awarded—a total derived from figures collected by foreign embassies. In response, Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, the state body in charge of preparing the tournament, said that the true number was thirty-seven, of whom only three had died in workplace accidents. (During the tournament, the Supreme Committee revised the estimate of the dead to about five hundred.)

Trying to disentangle World Cup-related deaths and hardship from Qatar's over-all economic structure is a mostly hopeless task. Doha's infrastructure projects involve a mille-feuille of international contractors and subcontractors—an ecosystem of plausible deniability. Causes of death are haphazardly reported, and the default categories ("natural causes," "cardiac arrest") change from year to year. Autopsies, particularly of poorer migrants, are rarely performed. Barrak Alahmad, a Kuwaiti public-health researcher at Harvard, told me that heat exposure, for example, almost never turns up in official statistics. "Good luck finding people dying from heat, because you're not going to find a problem," he said. "No data, no problem. That's it."

It's probably a mistake, in fact, to try to disentangle the World Cup from anything that has happened in Qatar. The Qatari Investment Authority, which manages an estimated four hundred and fifty billion dollars, didn't build a stage for a soccer tournament; it built a city to encompass the stage. The World Cup cost more than two hundred billion dollars (that's around sixty times the expense of the 2010 tournament, in South Africa), but the price tag included the metro system, an airport extension, bridges, man-

made islands, fighter jets, a collapsible stadium, and a bulk order of five-star hotels. Doha tripled in size during the twenty-tens. The population of Qatar increased by a million people, or sixty per cent. A lot of that growth probably would have happened without the World Cup. "Doha has been 'under construction' since I was born," Ali said. "Road closures or towers or new cities or whatever aren't really a new sight." The World Cup, as much as anything, was a deadline.

The work was done by migrants. Qataris make up about twelve per cent of the country's population—a ruling class of around three hundred thousand people. Of the 805,810 workers in the construction sector in 2017, 0.0016 per cent were Qatari nationals. "You're going to see two different populations living in the same country," Alahmad told me, before I travelled to Doha. "And the migrant population is just invisible to public policy." Throughout the Gulf, health inequality between full citizens and the thirty million migrant workers is structural and endemic. It takes in everything from housing to diet, workplace safety, and mental health. According to the Vital Signs Partnership, a coalition of migrant-advocacy groups, more than half of the estimated ten thousand annual deaths of South Asian workers in the region are "effectively unexplained." In 2019, researchers concluded that around a third of almost six hundred deaths among young, otherwise healthy Nepali migrants in Qatar could have been prevented. Other studies have reported that CKDnt, a chronic kidney condition linked to dehydration, is disproportionately common among laborers in the region. In 2018, a survey of Nepali workers who had spent more than six months in either the Gulf or Malaysia found that a quarter suffered from mental-health problems. Alahmad explained that, in public health, you expect a society's working population—younger, fitter, with fewer disabilities—to be in better shape than the rest. But, in the Gulf, the opposite is true. "I look at this, I'm astonished," he said. "But then you look at all the list of things that can explain this, and it's kind of clear."

Qatar was like this before it was Qatar. (The country gained independence in 1971.) Before gas, there were pearls. "We are all, from the highest to the lowest, slaves of one master, the pearl," Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani, the first emir, said, in 1863. Many of the divers who swam down to the pearl beds off the coast of Doha were African slaves. In 1916, Qatar became a British protectorate. But slavery was abolished only in 1952, when six

hundred and sixty slaves were freed, with compensation of fifteen hundred rupees (three hundred and fifteen dollars) per person, paid to their owners.



*A cameraman during the match between Uruguay and South Korea.*

The modern labor system is largely a product of Arab nationalism and civil unrest, which began in the fifties, when Qatar's resident population objected to being displaced from jobs on the new, British-administered oil fields by better-paid Indian and Pakistani workers. In 1961, everyone who could prove residence in Qatar before 1930 was offered citizenship. Everybody else needed to have a *kafeel*, or sponsor, to be able to work in the country. The *kafeel* could exert onerous control over a worker's life and movements. "This is a labor system based on temporary labor," Natasha Iskander, a migration scholar at New York University, told me. She did field work for three years among migrants in Doha's construction sector, before her research was shut down, in 2014. "Every single aspect of their rights and protections are tied to their economic function," she said. In 2020, following negative publicity surrounding the building of the World Cup, Qatar abolished its *kafala* system (the system is still in place elsewhere in the Gulf), but many of its principles remain intact. "The *kafala* system, under its current reform, is more protective than temporary-guest-worker legislation in the U.S.," Iskander said. "But it's not the law that determines conditions at work—it's the power dynamics."

Qataris often emphasize the diversity of the national population; the second emir referred to Qatar as the "Kaaba of the dispossessed," a refuge for exiles and traders across the Middle East. At the same time, the separation of the Qatari people from the foreign migrants who work for them is woven into the fabric of the country. Doha's zoning laws designate separate neighborhoods for Qatari families and for "bachelors," as the migrant laborers are known.

"There's not a single South Asian who comes to Qatar that thinks he's going to come and spend the rest of his life here," a prominent Qatari businessman, Khalid, told me. When I asked Khalid about the country's recent census, he described it as fake—meaning that it didn't refer to real Qataris. "The population of Qatar is built around how many people are needed to work in the country," he said. "The day you don't have these construction projects, most of these people are just going to eventually be served their end of service. 'Thank you very much. And now it's time for you to go back home.' "

In 2020, E. Tendayi Achiume, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, described Qatar as a "de facto caste system based on national origin," in which domestic workers were denied food, and women from sub-Saharan Africa were subjected to sexual abuse. Last year, Qatar introduced a minimum wage—two hundred and seventy-five dollars a month. The starting salary for a Qatari college graduate is around ten thousand dollars a month. "You do have the dichotomy in the approach between your own people, if you will, and the others," Khalid said. "Those other guys, we don't know them. We don't trust them. We're scared of them."

Since 2006, a new city has been under construction to the north of Doha. Lusail, which will cost forty-five billion dollars to build, is one of the largest developments in the Middle East. According to its marketing spiel, Lusail will be "a beacon of smart living," a pleasure dome of international hotels and underground parking. Qatar's wealth and its quiescent civil society—political parties are banned; there are no independent media—make it a testing ground for extreme urban planning. Iskander described Lusail as a modernist imaginary. "The city is for the élite," she said. "And it's not just *for* the élite—it *makes* the élites. It creates an élite kind of life style, where,

you know, everything is climate-controlled, everything is perfect. You're highly surveilled. But everything is seamless."

The World Cup final will take place at Lusail Stadium, an eighty-thousand-seat arena meant to evoke a handcrafted golden bowl. On the third day of the tournament, I visited the Place Vendôme, a fancy mall in downtown Lusail. A mobility scooter modelled on a stretch limousine waited outside a storefront bursting with luxuriant flowers. The brands—Cole Haan, Birkenstock, Nespresso, Skechers—were soothing and familiar. Outside, a sun-bleached futurama showed the rest of the unbuilt Vendôme neighborhood, complete with canals and two women in abayas, emerging from a black Rolls-Royce. Workers in blue overalls and high-visibility vests rested in the shade of an overpass. I stopped by one of the finished apartment blocks, where the rents are about four thousand dollars a month. "I would say it is the next big thing," the building manager said. "It is a luxury city." He was Lebanese and had been in Doha for three years. I asked him what he had learned there. He thought for a moment. "It's a country for work, actually," he said. "You don't have to care about basic things."

It is unclear who will live in Lusail. The city is projected to have around two hundred thousand permanent residents, which is two-thirds of the native Qatari population. But Qataris don't tend to live in apartments—at least not when they're in Qatar. "We're closer to an L.A. standard of living than a New York or a London or a Paris," Khalid explained. "Most Qataris live in big houses. They have aides at home. They go to these towers and it's all two-bedroom apartments, three-bedroom apartments. As Qataris, what are we going to do with that?" There are perhaps two hundred thousand white-collar migrants in the country. But, with rare exceptions, it is impossible for foreigners to own property in Doha. The logical way to populate Lusail would be to relax the country's migration laws and some of its social strictures—to create another Dubai—but that won't happen anytime soon. Hosting the World Cup has emphasized the contradiction between Qatar's international posturing and its cultural conservativism, which many Qataris regard as a deeply precious thing, along with their free electricity, free health care, free education, free land, eternal job security, and interest-free loans. "You see a duality—a struggle between wanting to be international and wanting to be left alone. The duality between playing global but staying

local," Khalid told me. "I don't want to turn into an HSBC ad, but that is the reality."

The first game at Lusail Stadium was Argentina against Saudi Arabia, or Lionel Messi versus someone or other. Argentina won the World Cup in 1978 and 1986, but since then it has often been the nearly team, full of wonderful players who can't quite get it together. Nobody is more wonderful than Messi, who played and lost in Argentina's last World Cup final, in 2014. He is thirty-five now. In the course of five tournaments, he has morphed from an elfin presence with shoulder-length hair, who floated across the turf, to an underslept dad, stepping out to buy some milk. During the warmup against Saudi Arabia, there must have been forty players on the field, going through drills, but the crowd watched only him. Messi stood outside the penalty area, taking casual potshots at the goal. Thousands oohed and gasped each time. When a shot hit the crossbar, he ambled away, apparently satisfied.

Messi walks a disconcerting amount during a match. Other soccer players, when they are not involved in the action, often jog to stay in position. Messi pads about. He has a low-slung dancer's waddle. The game is elsewhere. Then, by magnetism, or spatial genius, or because it's a good idea to pass to Lionel Messi, he has the ball, and eighty thousand people shift in their seats. Against Saudi Arabia, which had won one match at the World Cup in twenty-eight years, Messi nearly scored with his first or second touch of the ball, after a minute and forty seconds. Eight minutes later, he scored a penalty, rolling the ball to the right of Mohammed al-Owais, the Saudi goalkeeper. Everyone was pretty happy about it, even the Saudi fans. For the rest of the half, the Argentinean players kept trying to spring open the Saudi offside trap. Lautaro Martinez, a striker for Inter Milan, dinked the ball into the net, but the goal was disallowed by *FIFA*'s new semiautomated Video Assistant Referee. After years of rejecting technological assistance, to preserve the human fallibility of the game, *FIFA* was tracking players across twenty-nine body parts, fifty times per second, at the World Cup. The official match ball carried an inertial measurement unit. Offside decisions came down to the width of a nose hair.

At halftime, I met Ali al-Khaldi, a twenty-three-year-old ambulance dispatcher from Dhahran, an oil town on the coast of Saudi Arabia. Khaldi

had worked the night shift before boarding a plane to Doha. He hadn't slept since the previous day. "The offside trap is working perfectly," he said. Argentina had not lost for thirty-six matches, a streak lasting more than three years. Khaldi said that he would be happy with a 3–0 defeat, as long as Messi scored a hat trick.

Three minutes into the second half, Saleh al-Shehri, a twenty-nine-year-old forward, playing in his first World Cup game, burst through the Argentinean defense and placed a shot past Emiliano Martinez, the startled goalkeeper. The screens in the stadium flashed green, showing the Saudi sword. Then the Green Falcons went ahead. The ball fell to Salem al-Dawsari, a veteran winger who once played a single game in the Spanish league. He pushed it out from under his feet and swiped a vicious rising shot past Martinez. Apparently, it was Dawsari's signature move. The stadium went berserk. Dawsari performed a cartwheel and then a backflip. I looked at Khaldi, who put his hands over his face and then kissed his friend. He looked like he was having a panic attack.

The Saudis played like giants after that. Hassan al-Tambakti, a young defender from Riyadh, celebrated his tackles like goals. Mohammed Kanno, a tall, leggy midfielder, shadowed Messi everywhere he went. When the Argentinean fans, who came to Qatar in great numbers, tried to rouse their team, the Saudi fans waved their hands and whistled, to show that they were not scared. Messi picked the lock once or twice, squirting the ball to Argentina's forwards, but the Saudis smothered them each time. Owais, the goalkeeper, came flying out and crashed into Yasser al-Shahrani, the team's tigerish left back, fracturing his jaw. Celebrating in the din, Khaldi was hoarse: "The atmosphere is crazy. The result is stunning. The vibe is . . ." He could not describe the vibe. "I have the worst headache. It's killing me." Saudi fans streamed out in the golden light, into the modernist imaginary of Lusail, calling "olé"s and baiting the Argentinean fans. Three Saudis rolled out a Green Falcons prayer mat and turned in the direction of Mecca.

The Saudi victory kick-started the tournament. Spain defeated Costa Rica by seven goals to zero. Pablo Martín Páez Gavira, an eighteen-year-old midfielder known as Gavi, slanted in the fifth goal with the outside of his boot, becoming the World Cup's youngest scorer since Pelé. A few hours earlier, Japan had defeated Germany, 2–1. The Germans are no longer the

same team that won the World Cup eight years ago, in Brazil, but they cruised through the first seventy minutes, with a one-goal lead. The Blue Samurai equalized with a quarter of the game to go before Takuma Asano, a bleached-blond winger, squeezed the ball past Manuel Neuer, Germany's imperious goalkeeper and captain, like a cat slipping through a closing door.

The Qataris cheered the underdogs. "Sometimes when I see people speaking about how there isn't a football culture here, it really, really, *really* hurts me," Asma, a twenty-four-year-old Qatari woman, told me the following day, on Zoom. Asma loves soccer in all forms. She plays midfield. Her younger sister is a mean goalkeeper. "Football is what we grew up playing," she said. "We play football in the heat, barefoot, and we're good." Asma was having trouble leaving the house during the tournament because of all the games that she wanted to catch on TV. "I'm cheering for Japan against Germany by default yesterday," she said. "Because of this sense of war against the Western countries that is going on."

Neuer, like the other European captains, had wanted to wear a One Love armband. Before kicking off against Japan, the members of the German team protested their silencing by putting their hands over their mouths. Asma mocked them: "Going"—she covered her mouth—"and then losing it. You know, those things really help me sleep at night." Like many Qataris, Asma closely followed Western reporting on preparations for the World Cup. She noted that criticism of her country, which once centered on its involvement in corruption at *FIFA,* had moved on to labor conditions and the treatment of L.G.B.T.Q. people. "It's just, honestly, weird," Asma said. "It gets to a point where it's confusing."

At first, Asma assumed that rival nations were trying to get the location of the tournament changed. But now it seemed as if Qatar couldn't do anything right. "I don't know if Westerners do have their own outcome or desired goal to reach," Asma said. "If they do, and we fail to see it, then it's all for nothing. They're not really changing anything, even though they might believe they are." The fact that Dubai, a popular destination for European soccer players and their clubs, didn't seem to attract the same kind of ethical scrutiny drove her crazy. "They go to Dubai and love Dubai," Asma said. "And they don't care about migrant workers there. They love to take pictures of Burj Khalifa"—the world's tallest building—"but they don't care about

the people who build Burj Khalifa. It just gets, like, very confusing from an Arab perspective. Very, very, very confusing."

After the Germany match, Qatari Twitter was a loop of homophobic memes. La'eeb, the ineffable mascot, held a rainbow banner that was on fire. Skirts were Photoshopped onto the German team. The Japanese were a big hit in Qatar, on account of their extreme cleanliness. A picture of Japanese fans helping to tidy up Khalifa International Stadium, after the team's victory, was modified to show them putting rainbow flags in the trash.

The political subtexts of the World Cup were many, and updated by the hour. The day before Iran's second match, against Wales, Voria Ghafouri, a popular former national-team player and a critic of the regime, was detained after training with his team, Foolad Khuzestan—an apparent warning to the players in Qatar. Carlos Queiroz, the team's Portuguese coach, begged to talk about something else. "Why don't you ask the other coaches?" he told a reporter from the BBC. "Why don't you ask Southgate, 'What do you think about England and the United States that left Afghanistan and all the women alone?' "

Gareth Southgate, the English manager, is a centrist, down to his zip-neck polo shirts. He seemed flummoxed by the possibilities. "I think there's a risk that everybody tries to escalate," he said at a news conference. "Were we to try to produce a better video than Australia did? That would be impossible." (The Socceroos made a black-and-white film calling for better treatment of workers and same-sex couples in Qatar.) Southgate asked, "Do we have to come up with a better gesture than Germany?" After the German interior minister was photographed wearing a One Love armband, Qatari fans sported one in support of Palestine. Pan-Arab feeling was strong in Doha. "I'm cheering for all the Arab teams," Asma said. "I'm cheering for Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia." After the victory over Argentina, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar's emir, wrapped himself in the Saudi flag.

In early June, 2017, Qatar's immediate neighbors—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the U.A.E.—mounted an economic and diplomatic blockade. Air travel between the countries ceased, Qatar's land border with Saudi Arabia was closed, and Qatari diplomats were expelled. (Egypt, Yemen, and the Maldives also joined the blockade.) The ostensible reasons were Qatar's

willingness to fund and shelter Islamist opposition groups (a long-standing issue—Osama bin Laden was a visitor to Doha in the late nineties) and the activities of Al Jazeera, Qatar's pesky, state-funded news channel. Donald Trump, a recent visitor to the region, took credit on Twitter: "I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!" He described the blockade as "hard but necessary." At the time, Qatar imported ninety per cent of its food. There were rumors that Saudi troops were ready to invade.

The blockade, which lasted until January, 2021, had a galvanizing effect on Qatar. Eighteen thousand Holstein cows arrived from the European Union and the U.S. and were housed in the desert. (Qatar is now a dairy exporter.) The blockade was also a reminder of why the country wanted to host the World Cup. The fear of small, preposterously rich nations in the Gulf is what befell Kuwait in 1990, when Iraq invaded and the U.S. Congress had to think for a moment before doing anything about it. "Everything Qatar does arises from its security dilemma of being kind of wedged between these two regional major powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, both of which the Qataris don't trust," Andreas Krieg, a researcher at the School of Security Studies at King's College London, told me. Krieg spent three years in Doha, in the twenty-tens, establishing a staff college for the Qatari military. "The worst thing that could happen to Qatar is being kind of rendered irrelevant," he said.

Under the previous emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, who deposed his father in a coup, in 1995, Qatar modernized aggressively. "We have simply got to reform ourselves," Sheikh Hamad told *The New Yorker*, in 2000. "Change, more change, is coming." Since 2003, Qatar has hosted more than ten thousand U.S. military personnel at Al Udeid Air Base, twenty miles southeast of Doha. "That was like buying a gold-plated insurance policy," Steven Simon, who worked on Middle East issues at the National Security Council during the Clinton and Obama Administrations, told me. In 2006, Qatar overtook Indonesia as the world's largest exporter of natural gas. (Revenues were up fifty-eight per cent in 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the previous World Cup host.) The country's sovereign wealth fund owns Harrods, many billions of dollars' worth of New York real estate, and a ten-per-cent stake in Volkswagen. A former British diplomat, posted to Doha, told me that a Qatari official once asked him why he thought

that the country had invested in a billion-dollar liquid-natural-gas terminal in South Wales. “To sell us gas?” the diplomat ventured. “No,” the official replied. “It is so, when we call, your Prime Minister picks up.”




*“I’d like to be a shake-it-off kind of person, but I’m more of a cling-to-it-and-focus-on-it-until-it’s-irrevocably-woven-into-my-psyche sort of gal.”*
*Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst*

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But gas pipelines and defense agreements and department stores guarantee only so much attention in the Gulf. “We’re not the only ones with a lot of money. We’re not the only ones who are doing these arms deals. . . . So what do you do?” Khalid, the businessman, said. “You buy influence by getting into sports, because that’s where people talk about you.”

People also talk about “sportswashing,” to describe the activities of sovereign wealth funds like Saudi Arabia’s, which recently acquired Newcastle United, an English Premier League soccer team, and plans to spend two billion dollars on *LIV*, a breakaway golf league. The term suggests using sports to launder a lousy reputation. But, in the case of Qatar, staging the World Cup was more about gaining a reputation at all. Even bad publicity—around labor practices and human rights—is publicity. “Criticism will only go so far,” Simon, the former N.S.C. member, said. “The subject is raised, and the Qataris respond politely and with assurances.”

In Doha, people didn’t want to take anything for granted. “I don’t know if Qatar has won or not,” Khalid said. But he had been watching a Netflix documentary about previous World Cups, and he didn’t think that Argentina’s military dictatorship had done too badly out of it, in 1978. Likewise, he recalled anxieties around Brazil’s favelas and the Zika virus in

the run-up to the 2014 tournament. “That’s the point. These World Cups come and go,” he said. “But do people remember in the long run? Does this global conscience really exist, or is it a very short-term thing?”

Qatar’s second match was on a Friday, the country’s day of rest. In a restaurant in a busy part of Doha, I met Salim, a young clerical worker from Bangladesh. Salim came to Qatar six years ago, from Chittagong. He paid eighteen thousand Qatari rials (about five thousand dollars) to a middleman to get a job as a building inspector at one of the World Cup stadiums. It took Salim almost two years to earn the money back, and during that time he was terrified of falling foul of his employer, or of any Qatari he happened to meet. “First time when I see Qatari people, I feel afraid,” he said. “Because I thought if I do anything wrong with them . . . they will make any problem.” Salim said that he was encouraged to massage his inspection findings, to allow the project to meet its hasty schedule. “Everyone had a big pressure,” Salim said.

Like other migrant workers in Doha, Salim was caught up in the spectacle of the World Cup. He was also working as a *FIFA* volunteer. “This is very amazing,” he said. He took pride in what he had helped to build but also had a sense that he was disposable. “Me? This guy?” Salim gestured to a cousin he had brought to our meeting. “We are the same like animals. We are doing work. We are getting paid. After finish this project? ‘Yes, you can go. . . . You go to Hell. I don’t care.’ ” Salim helped to document poor labor practices in Qatar, on behalf of a human-rights organization. He had intervened in about twenty cases—ranging from inadequate food to nonpayment of workers—but he explained that it was risky to raise complaints. Trade unions do not exist in Qatar, and Salim’s visa did not cover his advocacy work. “This is not safe for me,” he said. He was nervous about a security camera in one corner of the restaurant.

Salim was considering his options. He missed his wife. They were planning to move to Europe. “I want to go there, and I want to stay there for a long time,” he said. “Until I die, that means.” Salim had found another middleman who might be able to help them get to Spain. The cost was around five thousand dollars.

Qatar is often most shocking in the ways that it resembles the most unequal corners of other societies, including our own. It is the frankness of the Qatari system, more than its iniquity, that is unusual. “This is a common and almost universal kind of setup,” Iskander, the migration scholar, said. “And this is one of the reasons that we are all implicated in the system. It is not, you know, the Qataris behaving badly. It is us, as a global community, really having to confront what it looks like when you rely utterly on a system that deprives people of rights beyond their economic function.”

During her research in Doha, Iskander noted that recruiters targeted communities in parts of South Asia and North Africa that were suffering the impacts of climate change. “Those are the best places to get large numbers of workers very quickly. It makes perfect business sense,” she said. Qatar’s wealth and hustle make it an innovator, rather than an outlier. “Whose bodies are we willing to sacrifice to preserve this system of production?” Iskander said. “I think Qatar is kind of a window onto some of these politics as they emerge.”

In the months leading up to the World Cup, bachelors were evicted from their lodgings in Doha, to make room for tourists and to comply with the city’s zoning laws. Many were moved to the Industrial Area, a district of some twelve square miles, with a population density similar to New Delhi’s. I had tea in the district with a group of laborers and mechanics from Peshawar, Pakistan. A crane operator in his twenties named Imran had been in Doha for a little less than a year. In Pakistan, Imran had worked on fifty-ton cranes, earning about two hundred dollars a month. In Qatar, he had learned to use a hundred-ton crane, with a computer, and was making almost seven times as much. “Crane is all math,” Imran said. “It is a very sensitive subject.” He was working on a development on the waterfront.

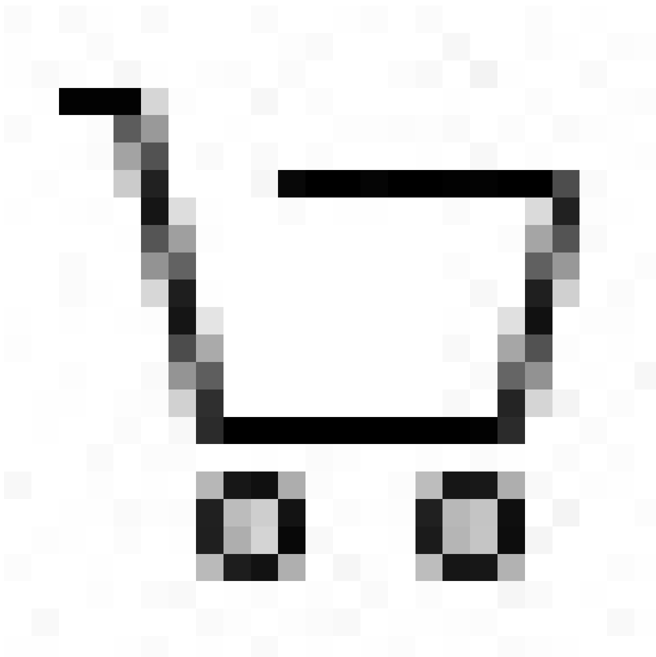



*“Once we make it as New York novelists, we’ll be able to move to L.A. and write for TV.”*
*Cartoon by Liana Finck*

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Imran was a buoyant, positive soul. But the long, hot days were a killer. He worked twelve-hour shifts and lived an hour’s drive from the construction site. “They have no respect for labor. No respect for other people,” Imran said. When an older relative named Asif joined the conversation, however, Imran deferred to him and agreed that Doha was a good place after all. “People want to show the negative face of this country,” Asif said. “We earn too much money, *alhamdulillah*.” Asif described critical reporting during the preparation for the World Cup as total bullshit. Until about five months ago, the group of men had lived in Al Wakrah, a suburb south of Doha, where the English team was staying. Their current lodgings were at the rear of a warehouse, the front of which was a scrap yard for old trucks, which were being dismantled for parts to sell in Lebanon and Nigeria. The men slept five to a room. Shalwar kameez, freshly laundered, hung from pegs above their beds. “Wakrah-side was neat and clean,” Imran said. “This side is not neat and clean.” Drinking water was a problem. A vaguely irritating burning smell, from the scrap yard, drifted in the air.

The Industrial Area had a fan zone, a temporary enclosure next to a highway leading out of the city, where workers could follow the World Cup. Like many young men from Pakistan, the laborers from Peshawar weren’t really soccer guys. Next to the fan zone, a game of cricket was taking place in the dust. The fan zone had a large screen and around four thousand plastic

garden chairs. Everybody who entered was given a lottery ticket, with a chance to win a water bottle and other merchandise at halftime.

Qatar was playing Senegal, which in its first game had narrowly fallen to the Dutch. I was curious to see whose side the crowd was on, and it was most definitely the Maroon. “Qatar is our second home,” Asif had said. The hosts played better in this game. Each time a Qatari player went over the halfway line, there was wild excitement and the sound of hundreds of plastic chairs tipping over. A few minutes before halftime, Boualem Khoukhi, an Algerian-born defender, who was naturalized to play for Qatar, miscued a clearance and ended up sitting on the turf. Boulaye Dia, a Senegalese striker, slammed in the opening goal. A few rows in front of me, a man stood up and spun around with happiness. The biggest whoops from the rest of the crowd came when the camera settled on a large-breasted Senegal fan. According to figures from 2015, the Industrial Area’s population is 99.02 per cent male.

Qatar lost the match, 3–1. I didn’t see the Maroon’s first and only goal of the tournament because I was politely removed from the fan zone by the manager. It wasn’t a *FIFA* facility, he explained; it was run by Qatar’s Workers’ Support and Insurance Fund, which disbursed more than three hundred million dollars in unpaid wages to migrant laborers in the first nine months of 2022.

The upsets continued. Morocco beat Belgium, which was ranked second in the world. In Brussels, fans set fire to a car and some electric scooters. The Belgians crashed out in the group stage. There were goal floods—fourteen goals in a single day—and goal droughts. There were five 0–0 draws in the first week, four more than in the entire tournament in 2018. It was unclear whether the winter timing was helping or hurting matters. After defeating Germany, Japan went one better and toppled Spain. The Germans went home. The French looked ominous. The Brazilians, more than anybody else, looked like they were having fun. Before their second match, against Switzerland, the team bus bounced on its suspension in the parking lot of Stadium 974—a reusable structure made largely from shipping containers—and then the players tumbled out, looking sheepish.

The joy of watching the Seleção is not in how it scores stupendous goals. (In Brazil’s first match, against Serbia, Richarlison, a forward, popped the ball

over his own shoulder and scored from a bicycle kick.) It is in how the players perform the most ordinary aspects of the game: little dabs here, slippery feints, ugly toe pokes, a shared urge for continual, needless experiment. In the first half against Switzerland, Thiago Silva, Brazil's thirty-eight-year-old center back, sent the ball out to the left wing with a pass that looked like a chip with a golf club. The game was stodgy, to be honest. But, in the eighty-third minute, Casemiro, who is known as a defensive midfielder, sent a half volley flying into the top corner of the net. Yann Sommer, the Swiss goalkeeper, puffed out his cheeks and watched it go. The Brazilians ran to the corner of the pitch and bounced in a tight huddle. Their fans got going—thousands of windmilling yellow scarves—and soon the temporary stands of Stadium 974 were bouncing, too.

The U.S. team started promisingly, if unspectacularly, with draws against Wales and England. During the England game, in particular, the U.S. played with vigor and nerve, but without making many chances to score. The results left the team needing to beat Iran, of all countries, to progress to the knockout stages. In the semiotics of Qatar 2022, the many meanings of a showdown between the Great Satan and the Islamic Republic were almost too much to process. Two days before the match, the U.S. Soccer Federation displayed images of the group table with the Iranian flag altered to its pre-revolutionary design, in a gesture of solidarity with women protesting against the regime. In response, Iran's football federation demanded that the U.S. be thrown out of the competition. At a crowded news conference, at which no female reporters were invited to speak, Berhalter, the U.S. coach, apologized, but expressed his support for the Iranian people and team. It was a minefield. By my count, Berhalter was asked twenty questions, nine of which had nothing to do with soccer. Tyler Adams, the team's twenty-three-year-old captain, was scolded by a reporter from Press TV, an Iranian news channel, for his pronunciation of "Iran," and was asked what it was like for a Black athlete to represent a racist country. Berhalter was criticized for the way that the U.S. deals with Iranian-passport holders. "I don't know enough about politics," he replied. "I'm a soccer coach."

Berhalter's opposite number was Queiroz, the sixty-nine-year-old coach of Iran, who was leading the country in a third successive World Cup. Queiroz is one of soccer's great soldiers of fortune. He played as a goalkeeper in Mozambique before coaching in England, Japan, Portugal, South Africa, and

the U.A.E. He did a spell with Colombia. He worked in the M.L.S., the American league. Queiroz is fluent in the language of healing in which the sport likes to speak about itself. He understood that people might see other questions riding on the match, but that wasn't his concern. "Our mission here is to create entertainment," he said. "And, at least during ninety minutes, make the people happy." Queiroz's father was a coach, too, and Queiroz said that he had taught him never to lie to soccer, which seemed to mean thinking about anything outside the sport. "If my mind falls into the trap," Queiroz said, "I am lying to football, and I won't do that."

Outside Al Thumama Stadium, which was built in the shape of a *gahfiya*—an Arab woven cap—there were people dressed up as bugs, with large, L.E.D.-lit wings, along with a noticeable police presence. I met Amir Salek, an Iranian venture capitalist who has lived in the U.S. for twenty-seven years. Salek was wearing a star-spangled banner around his waist and a headdress with Iranian colors. He was attending his seventeenth game of the tournament. He thought that the stakes favored the U.S. "The psychology of the Iranian team is that they win if they really, really have to win," Salek said. "But tonight they can advance with a tie, and that usually is a recipe for failure."

The noise inside was ferocious. The Iranian fans had brought horns. The crowd was partisan, but polyglot. The flags of Lebanon, Palestine, Croatia, Mexico, and Colombia jumbled together. When Saeid Ezatolahi, an Iranian defensive midfielder, walked out, he raised his arms to the black circle of the sky, as if to better absorb the din. The Iranians never got going. Their play was skillful but disjointed. The U.S. kept its shape and passed in patterns. The team's midfield trio of Adams, Weston McKennie, and Yunus Musah controlled the tempo. Seven minutes before halftime, Musah played a perfect pass out to the right. Sergiño Dest headed the ball back across goal, and Christian Pulisic hooked it into the net, injuring himself in the process. (Pulisic was taken to the hospital with a pelvic contusion.)

The second half was more of the same. The U.S. created better opportunities, but Iran competed fiercely. A single Iranian goal would have changed everything. The drums never stopped. In the ninety-third minute, Morteza Pouraliganji, an Iranian defender who grew up near the Caspian

Sea, sent a low diving header skittering wide of the post. His teammates scratched their heads. Matt Turner, the U.S. goalkeeper, ran down the clock.

At the end, the U.S. substitutes ran onto the field in celebration, while half the Iranian players sank to the exquisite turf. The Iranian coaches and some American players encouraged them to stand up again, but they didn't want to. So much of the act of watching sport is about making a story, willing a memory into existence—imagining how we want things to be—only for something more prosaic and unexpected to happen in its place. The U.S. went on to face the Netherlands. Qatari V.I.P.s emerged from Al Thumama and were stowed in Bentley S.U.V.s. Drones buzzed in the Doha sky. The hubbub of the dispersing crowd joined with the other sounds of the city. ♦

**By Jody Rosen**

**By Heidi Blake**

**By Clare Malone**

**By Ed Caesar**

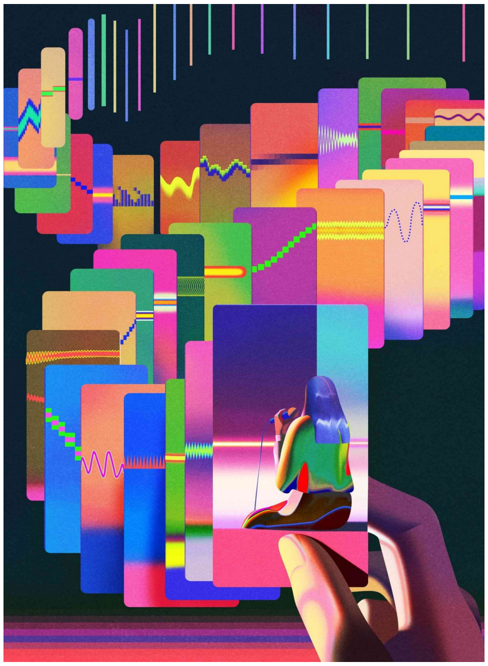
## Annals of Music

- **So You Want to Be a TikTok Star**

# So You Want to Be a TikTok Star

The social-media platform is transforming the music industry. Is that a good thing?

By John Seabrook



In December, 2020, after spending nine months of the pandemic at home with her family, Katherine Li began posting her music on TikTok. "There was nothing else for me to do," Li, who is a nineteen-year-old sophomore at the University of Toronto, told me when I visited her in Oakville, a leafy Toronto suburb, where she had holed up during the lockdown with her father, Chengwu, her mother, Xiaohong (who goes by Maggie), and her brother, Vincent, who is five years younger. She also has a sister, Alice, her elder by nine years.

"I was always in my room," Li went on. "With the keyboard, writing snippets of songs. I thought, What am I going to do with these? Oh, I'll put them up on TikTok!"

Like many Gen Z kids, Li grew up steeped in social media (she started using Instagram in third grade) and in music, much of it transmitted visually. When Maggie Li was pursuing her master's degree in economics at the

University of Ottawa, Katherine was born, in 2003, and Maggie would put the crib in front of the TV with music videos or music-oriented programming playing while she studied. As a tween, Katherine became obsessed with Nickelodeon's "Victorious," a sitcom about a teen musical artist, played by Victoria Justice; Ariana Grande was among the cast members.

"I'd see all the music and think, That looks so fun! I really want to do that!" she told me. By the end of middle school, she was still thinking, I believe in myself, and I can totally do this!

Her mother had imagined Katherine's future differently. The Lis, who speak Mandarin at home, left Beijing for Canada in October, 2001, "in search of a better life," as Chengwu Li, a mechanical engineer, put it. Their middle daughter was an outstanding student. "The best in everything," Maggie told me, with fierce pride. She thought that Katherine would attend medical school and become a pediatrician. Alice was the performer in the family. She sang, modelled, acted, danced, and won beauty pageants. "I've looked up to her my whole life," Katherine said, of her big sister.

Katherine began piano lessons in first grade, and could sight-read music. Her showpiece was Richard Clayderman's "Mariage d'Amour." But, apart from singing in the choir at school, and occasionally busking with Alice (who was chosen as an official subway musician by the Toronto Transit Commission), her only public vocal performances were the YouTube videos she made in her room, in which she sang covers of songs by Taylor Swift, Julia Michaels, and Shawn Mendes. She hoped to follow the bedroom-to-*Billboard* path blazed by her countryman Justin Bieber, who was discovered on YouTube in 2008, and, more recently, by Mendes himself, another Canadian, who broke out in 2013 on Vine, a short-form-video platform. But Katherine Li's YouTube videos did not go viral. Fifty views, mostly friends, was a good showing. She began to doubt herself, wondering, Are people interested? Is this realistic?

In 2014, Li downloaded Musical.ly, an app for sharing short, user-generated videos which had been launched in Shanghai that year by two Chinese entrepreneurs, Alex Zhu and Yang Luyu, and quickly became popular in the U.S. She posted videos of herself lip-synching and dancing to trending songs

on the app. In 2017, Musical.ly was bought by ByteDance, a Chinese startup that had previously created Toutiao, an algorithmically fed news aggregator; Douyin, a short-form-video platform available only in China; and TikTok, a Douyin-like app for the rest of the world. ByteDance engineered a new algorithm for Musical.ly, and merged its users with those of TikTok.

By mid-2021, thanks to teen-agers like Li, TikTok had reached a billion active monthly users. Facebook, by comparison, which was launched in 2004, has 2.9 billion monthly users. TikTok users skew younger. Sixty-seven per cent of all American teen-agers use the app, and their parents are joining now, too. According to the data-analytics company Sensor Tower, the average user spends ninety-five minutes on the site—almost twice as long as they linger on the Gram.

At first, Li was only a viewer, rather than a "creator," as TikTok flatteringly refers to anyone who uploads videos. To soundtrack their videos, TikTok creators can choose from a vast library of licensed sounds, which are mostly parts of songs, and which vary in length from a few seconds to a minute. The genius of TikTok's business model is that the entertainment is almost entirely composed of user-generated videos, which cost a tiny fraction of the seventeen billion dollars that Netflix, for example, spent on professional content in 2021. TikTok is reportedly on track to make nearly ten billion dollars in revenue this year, mostly by selling ads against what is essentially free programming. Even so, this figure is still well short of the hundred and eighteen billion dollars that Facebook made in 2021.

"I was on the 'For You' page a lot," Li told me. The "For You" feed is algorithmically tailored for each TikTok user; like snowflakes, no two "For You" feeds are exactly the same. Instead of the app displaying content that you've chosen to see from a collection of friends and other accounts that you've curated yourself, a machine-learning algorithm is your curator. Drawing on your usage patterns, your account settings, and data from your device—which could include information about people who are contacts in your phone, Facebook friends, and people you have sent TikTok links to or opened links from—the app predicts what content you really want to see. If you post a video in which you appear, biometric and demographic information that includes gender, ethnicity, and age could be scraped from your face and potentially added to the data slurry.

Mainly, though, the TikTok algorithm relies on the “signals” harvested from your responses to your “For You” feed: likes, comments, and the length of time you watch a video before swiping to the next one, by flicking your fingers up the screen. Every action, or lack of one, tells the A.I. something about your level of “engagement”—the caviar of social metrics. A user who swipes through thirty fifteen-second videos, say, provides the TikTok algorithm with many more signals than YouTube gets from a user who watches one seven-and-a-half-minute video on its platform. Those signals, in turn, allow the TikTok algorithm to home in more closely on your private desires. After a couple of hours of swiping, TikTok users get bespoke recommendations that make other feeds feel off-the-rack. “The TikTok algorithm knows me better than I know myself” is a Gen Z utterance I heard often in my reporting.

Li’s first original posts featured her singing sweet-sad melodies with lyrics about high-school crushes, a TikTok-enabled genre loosely defined as “bedroom pop.” She felt empowered on the platform, where, on any given day, the algorithm can make almost any creator’s video go viral, regardless of how many followers she has, which is not the case on YouTube.

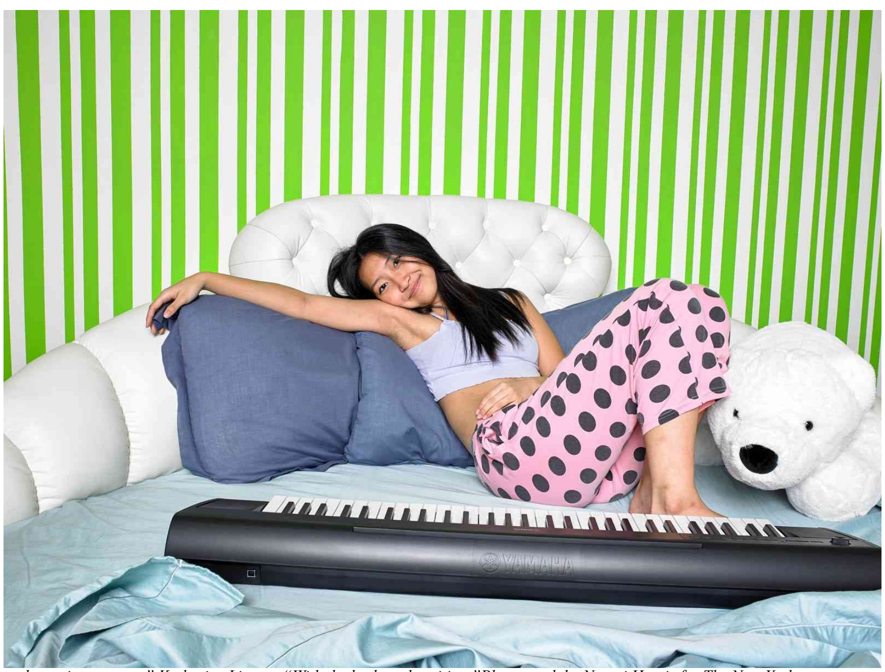
O.K., this is my chance, Li thought.

The music industry has been the canary in the digital-content coal mine ever since Napster made music free, in 1999. As technology has steadily altered the form recorded music takes—vinyl records became cassettes, then CDs, then MP3s, then streams—the industry has found new ways to monetize the thing that never changes: the emotional connection a song creates between an artist and a fan.

After lean years early in the new millennium, when the industry saw CD sales crater while its technophobic leaders dithered over converting to file-sharing, the major labels figured out how to turn streaming to their advantage. In recent years, the three majors—Universal, Warner, and Sony—have aggressively enforced copyright and pushed Spotify and other streaming platforms to hand over as much as seventy per cent of their revenues; the profits from, and the value of, the music catalogues the labels own have soared. In 2021 alone, the value of global copyrights rose eighteen

per cent, to $39.6 billion, according to a recent report by the author and former Spotify chief economist Will Page.

Now music is meeting a kind of metaverse, in the form of the rapidly evolving platform of sound, video, social media, and marketing that is TikTok. Even before the *COVID*-19 pandemic, TikTok had become a potent music-discovery tool. In one minute on the site, a user like my fourteen-year-old daughter, Rose, might swipe through twenty or more brief videos, each with a short piece of a song synched to it by the video's creator. Some songs are new, but many are decades old. If Rose hears an interesting sound —Smashmouth's "Walkin' on the Sun," for example—she can click the record icon at the bottom and go to the sound page, where she can see the artist and the song name. Then, in theory, she can go to Spotify, Apple, or another distributed streaming platform, where the whole song can be streamed and its owners paid. (In reality, she goes to YouTube, where the stream pays, too, but at a lower rate.) On a distribution platform, a song's owners are paid per stream, but on TikTok there is no set royalty structure in place, and it provides only negligible income, a growing point of tension with the music industry.



*"I was always in my room," Katherine Li says. "With the keyboard, writing."Photograph by Naomi Harris for The New Yorker*

The videos function as a kind of trailer for the songs, but, instead of a song's owners being in charge of the production, TikTok creators can synch the

sound to videos they've made about almost anything, provided they stay within community guidelines, which forbid nudity and abuse. They can also slow down or speed up music, in accordance with the latest TikTok trend. Syco Entertainment, founded by Simon Cowell, recently announced that sixty seconds of "Red Lights," a new song co-written by the Swedish hitmaker Max Martin, Savan Kotecha, and Ali Payami, would be made available for remixing by TikTok creators before its release.

One of TikTok's early champions within the music industry was Ole Obermann. In 2018, when he was the chief digital officer at the Warner Music Group, he had an "Aha!" moment about TikTok, he told me. "The only other time I had a similar moment was when I first used Spotify," he said, referring back to 2007. Partly because of TikTok's merger with Musical.ly, an app that had been utilized primarily for tween lip-synching battles, many executives weren't using it. Obermann tried to make his skeptical colleagues understand that TikTok was going to be the next big thing. He likened user-generated videos, on which creators spend many hours, to the mixtapes people made back in the day—"the ultimate form of fandom," he said. To me, he described TikTok as a combination of elements of Top Forty radio, music television, and streaming: "There has never been anything that can get a song hooked in your head the way TikTok does it."

In March, 2019, "Old Town Road," a little known song by Lil Nas X, went viral on TikTok, thanks in part to a video by a twenty-one-year-old Boston-based creator named Michael Pelchat. In the video, Pelchat did a dance featuring a quick-cut costume change into a cowboy outfit (a "transition," in TikTok lingo), which was synched to the lyric "I got the horses in the back." An explosion of videos by other creators using the song and the same gimmick followed in the next few months. A remix of the song with Billy Ray Cyrus topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 for nineteen weeks, an all-time record, converting most remaining music-industry skeptics into TikTok champions. Pelchat earned five hundred dollars for his contribution to making "Old Town Road" a megahit. Lil Nas X gave him the money himself, saying, "Thank you, man, for changing my life, here's $500," Pelchat told *Rolling Stone*.

The "Old Town Road" rocket launch demonstrated the essential role that creators' videos play in a song's viral trajectory. The videos could

potentially spread a piece of the song to hundreds of millions of listeners, who might then stream the original version on another platform. TikTok also proved that it could make hits out of songs that bricked at first. "Sunday Best," a track by Surfaces, a Texas-based electro-pop duo, became extremely popular on TikTok in early 2020, a year after its release, when the line "Feeling good, like I should" was synched to dance videos. The song was rereleased to radio that March, at the start of lockdown, and turned into a global smash.

Finally, TikTok showed that a forty-year-old hit could chart again. When a video selfie made by Nathan Apodaca, in which he skateboarded and drank cran-raspberry juice from a bottle while vibing to the first lines of Fleetwood Mac's 1977 track "Dreams"—"Now, here you go again, you say you want your freedom / Well, who am I to keep you down? / It's only right that you should play the way you feel it"—went crazy viral, the song returned to the *Billboard* charts, in October, 2020. A month later, Stevie Nicks, who wrote the song, sold the publishing rights to most of her catalogue, including "Dreams," for a reported hundred million dollars. Apodaca, who was homeless at the time he made the video, earned no royalties, but he did receive donations, and Ocean Spray gave him a pickup truck loaded with juice; he also scored a recurring role on the most recent season of the Hulu comedy "Reservation Dogs."

By then, Ole Obermann had left Warner Music for a new gig: global head of music at TikTok.

Katherine Li had already seen other musicians blowing up on TikTok. There were new superstars like Doja Cat and Megan Thee Stallion, whose hit song "Savage" caught fire on the platform in the spring of 2020. But both artists' careers had predated TikTok, and they had major-label backing. Although Li, like virtually all TikTok creators, longed for fame, she couldn't imagine being that kind of famous herself. She could, she told me, relate to "these smaller artists on TikTok, who were also getting so much exposure." In 2020 alone, more than seventy new artists who broke out on TikTok signed contracts with record labels. "In a pre-TikTok world, it was hard to draw a crowd, and artists used that process to hone their craft," Billy Mann, a Grammy-nominated producer, songwriter, and record executive, told me, of the traditional route to a record deal—performing live to growing audiences.

“Now you can start with a crowd in your phone and pray that craft catches up.”

Li was intrigued, too, by D.I.Y. TikTok artists who were monetizing their music careers through influencer deals with brands. That way, they could often keep the rights to their songs. She also cited Taylor Swift to me as a music-business role model. Swift is currently rerecording albums that she made earlier in her career for Big Machine, a Nashville-based independent label distributed by Universal, in order to regain control of her “masters,” the industry term for the original sound recordings—those copyrights are separate from the lyrics and melodies in the composition, known as the “publishing.” Scooter Braun, Big Machine’s then owner, sold Swift’s masters to Shamrock Holdings, a Disney-family investment vehicle, against the artist’s wishes. The “Taylor’s Version” masters are her revenge.

“I learned from Taylor,” Li said. “You keep control of your masters.”

Swift built her career during the file-sharing era, which changed the business model for many artists, shifting the main source of revenue away from recorded music, which can be pirated, and toward ticket sales to live events. The pandemic ended the touring economy almost overnight. Live-streamed concerts tried to fill the void, but they were pale substitutes for the real thing. With everyone stuck at home, TikTok became the show.

Tours returned in full force in 2022, but the TikTok algorithm has remained the sun around which the music industry orbits, and the arbiter-in-chief of what’s hot. Top Ten songs on radio and streaming charts often start trending first on TikTok. As many as a hundred thousand new tracks are now released by record labels and individual musicians every day on any number of platforms. Having a viral video attached to part of a song is one of the few ways to capture anyone’s attention. Virality also tilts the arcane economics of streaming in the copyright holders’ favor, because the worth of any single stream is based on the percentage of a streaming platform’s total monthly streams that the song commands. In other words, a lot of listens in a short amount of time will make you more money per stream than a slow-burner will.

But how does the algorithm launch viral trends on TikTok? Machine learning is a form of A.I. that identifies patterns in data and makes predictions and recommendations based on them. Because of the complexity of their calculations and the sheer volume of data they ingest, the exact workings of powerful A.I.s like TikTok's are difficult to comprehend. Still, there are theories about TikTok's algorithm. The batch theory holds that the algorithm shows new content to small batches of users around the world, and, if a video gains traction somewhere, the app sends the video to a larger batch of users, and then a still larger one. Within the batch theory, there are more theories about how a video gains traction in the first place. Some hold that the ratio of likes to views is the key metric. For others, it's whether people stay with a video to its end. Some combination of all these factors is probably at play. TikTok itself has confirmed aspects of this on its Web site, but without much granularity. There is no shortage of YouTube videos or Reddit threads probing the mysteries of the recommendation algorithm for users who suspect that it is being periodically tweaked by ByteDance engineers.

Viral videos aren't new, of course, but attempting to incorporate virality into the way artists are discovered and their songs are marketed is. For label executives looking to sign and develop new talent, the challenge is to understand why a song goes viral on TikTok in the first place. Is it the music, or is it the artist's personality? Or is it the creator who started a dance trend synched to the sound? Or is it the flash of a tattoo on a hunky creator's biceps, or the glimpse of a creator's cleavage as she bends to press Play before doing her slinky dance?

"You could be gaining eyeballs and fans for things other than music," Mike Caren, a former president of A. & R. at Warner Music, told me when I went to see him at APG, a boutique label in Beverly Hills, where he is the C.E.O. Caren, who is forty-five, and who started in the business as an intern at Interscope Records when he was fifteen, went on, "Or, you could have songs that go viral because of a six-second line in the song, but then when people hear the whole song they go, 'This sucks!' So you have to see through all that and ask, Is it really about the music?"

Industry gatekeepers have always used data to try to gauge how deeply a song or an artist connects with fans. Radio programmers have long relied on

“call-out research,” derived from playing a song’s hook for a focus group, to help predict whether the song will be a hit. TikTok does something similar, automatically. It offers real-time global call-out data on every sound on the platform, new and old.

Likewise, record executives have scouted talent online since the early years of YouTube, which launched in 2005 and was purchased by Google in 2006. But before the pandemic few would have signed an act without first hearing the artist perform live. Caren recalled going to a basement club in London in 2010 to see an unknown artist named Ed Sheeran. “I had already seen data which led me to go,” Caren said. “He opened for a rapper and there was a hip-hop d.j. on before him. And Ed walks out there with an acoustic guitar over his back. I thought, Oh, man, this is going to be brutal. People are going to turn their backs. But he managed to capture the entire audience, who were not there for him, because of his passion.” That show, Caren said, was “another data point. But it wasn’t a numerical metric.” Warner signed Sheeran several months later.

During the pandemic, however, signing acts on the basis of social-media presence alone became the norm among the majors—your phone was the club—and the practice has persisted even as live shows have returned. Some music professionals say, with sadness, that if forced to choose between an artist with good numbers on social media but so-so music and one with great music but lacklustre “socials,” they’d have to choose the former. Chioke (Stretch) McCoy, a veteran manager of top hip-hop acts, told me that he would always favor the artist’s talent over the data, but he added that while TikTok was great for music it was not necessarily great for musicians, whom labels are treating as if they are as disposable as their songs.

Caren mentioned a TikTok artist who had recently had a viral moment. “If he had signed a deal last week, he would have gotten a couple of million dollars,” he said. “If it takes him a couple weeks to close his deal, and the data keeps going up, it could get more expensive for us.”

And if his data go down? “Some would back off. It’s possible no one might sign him.”

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, 2020, while Li was working on her college applications, she tried to write "an original snippet" of a song for TikTok, just a couple of lines generally, every other day. "Usually, I wrote it just thirty minutes before I posted it," she told me. With her phone propped up on a small tripod, she'd record the snippet, singing along to chords she played on a keyboard in her bedroom, and upload it to TikTok. In the morning, she would check TikTok as soon as she woke, then go downstairs and say, "Look, Mom, I got thirty views!"

"Woo-hoo!" her mother would respond gamely.

The Lis weren't overly concerned with the politics surrounding TikTok, which some governments view as a major security risk. India permanently banned the app in 2021. In 2020, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13942, which stated that TikTok's "data collection threatens to allow the Chinese Communist Party access to Americans' personal and proprietary information." The Trump Administration sought to force ByteDance to sell TikTok to Microsoft, Oracle, or another U.S.-based tech company or be banned, but the bid stalled in federal court. A bill seeking to ban TikTok from government-issued devices, sponsored by Missouri's junior senator, Josh Hawley, is currently before Congress. Christopher Wray, the F.B.I. director, recently told lawmakers that TikTok raises national-security concerns. TikTok said in response, "As Director Wray specified in his remarks, the FBI's input is being considered as part of our ongoing negotiations with the U.S. Government. While we can't comment on the specifics of those confidential discussions, we are confident that we are on a path to fully satisfy all reasonable U.S. national security concerns."

On December 23rd, Li sat at her desk and prepared to record a new snippet. Next to her was a handwritten list of goals for 2020, with a small box drawn beside each goal, checked or unchecked, depending on whether it had been accomplished. The box next to "Stay Off WiFi for One Day" remained unchecked.

Looking into her phone, Li sang all that existed of "Heartache," her latest song bite, closing her eyes, her long black hair falling over her forehead:

We're in a heartache
And I hope it's O.K.
That you're living rent-free
In my mind

The clip is entirely affectless—an authentic moment of pure lyricism. It's as though we were watching from the other side of a looking glass as a sweet, guileless girl shares what's in her heart in the privacy of her bedroom. Li's vocal tone on the word "heartache" carries a piercing note of sadness that may have sounded especially resonant that pandemic holiday season.

Li posted the video, climbed into her big, round bed under colored L.E.D. strip lights on the ceiling, and went to sleep.

Jacob Pace was nineteen when, in 2017, he assumed control of Flighthouse, a Musical.ly account that he helped transform into a studio for short-form videos for TikTok. At first, he told me, labels and publishers wanted Flighthouse to pay a fee for a license so that it could use copyrighted music, as is standard practice in TV and film. But Pace couldn't believe it. "They wanted *us* to pay *them* for using their songs!" he exclaimed to me recently, still incredulous at age twenty-four.

Bruh. What did you expect? That was how the industry survived Napster and its spawn: by leveraging the publishing and recording copyrights owned by the majors. But, with the rise of platforms like Musical.ly and TikTok, the century-old consumption-based model of royalty payments has been replaced by a collaborative model, in which rights holders and online creators are partners in the chancy enterprise of virality. As a social-media native, Pace knew what the music industry would soon grasp collectively: that the balance of power had shifted from the song and its owners to the netizens who could make the song go viral. A new economy of TikTok creator-influencers was emerging, who were selling lightning in a bottle, and Flighthouse became an apothecary of virality.

In 2019, Barbara Jones, a former marketing manager at Columbia Records who had had her own "Aha!" moment about TikTok, founded Outshine Talent, to represent TikTok creators and act as a conduit to the labels and brands that need their influence. Charli D'Amelio, one of Jones's first

clients, was a teen-age competitive dancer from Norwalk, Connecticut, whose videos of herself doing choreographed dances to hip-hop songs in her upper-middle-class family home made her wildly popular on TikTok, a kind of Kardashian next door. By mid-2020, whatever song Charli chose had a decent shot at going viral. When Charli danced to "Lottery (Renegade)," by K Camp, the song exploded. (D'Amelio, who is white, was later revealed to have appropriated the choreography for her video from a Black creator, Jalaiah Harmon.) Likewise, "In the Party," by Flo Milli, got a spike from Charli's moves. But, unlike Michael Pelchat, who helped make "Old Town Road" go viral, D'Amelio, with Jones's assistance, monetized her influence.

Jones walked me through the prices that creators charge to boost songs, distinguishing between "initiators," who can start a fire under a song, and "accelerators," who add fuel to it. Lower-tier creators, with follower counts ranging from twenty thousand to a million, can charge between two hundred and fifty dollars and a thousand dollars a video; mid-tier creators, with millions of followers, get between a thousand dollars and three thousand dollars; and the upper tier, where such TikTok élite as D'Amelio dwell, can receive up to seventy-five thousand dollars for a post. However, Jones cautioned, "it's still so risky. You can't make something viral." Would Nathan Apodaca's "Dreams" video have gone viral if he'd been a paid influencer? All a digital marketer can do is closely monitor what's happening organically on TikTok, and then hire creators to juice the trend.

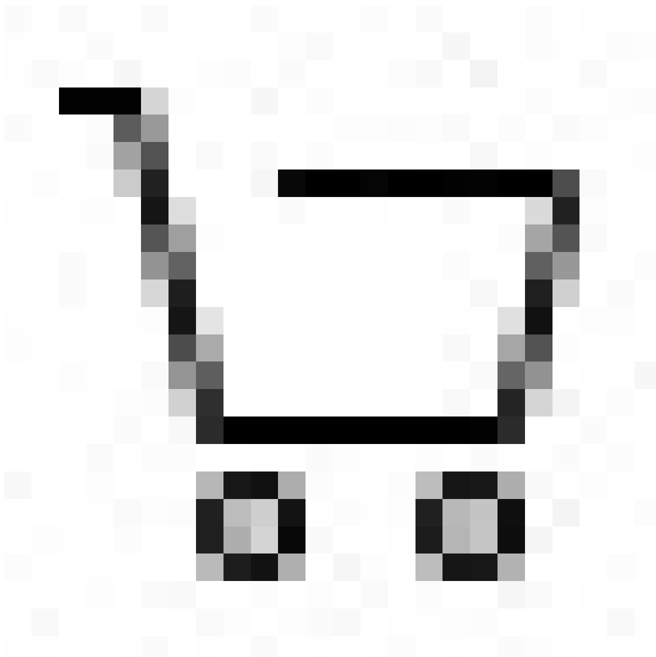



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

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The Federal Trade Commission supposedly maintains oversight of these paid sponsorships in music, but in contrast to paid brand sponsorships, which are required to be labelled as ads, hired music influencers are rarely identified as such. One insider told me, of the way labels pay creators, “It’s down and dirty—‘Can you get it done tomorrow? We’ll Venmo you.’ ” The practice is not unlike payola, except that it doesn’t seem to be very heavily policed; it dwells in the same murky mixture of marketing and culture that extends across much of TikTok.

Jacob Pace went from Flighthouse to Pearpop, an influencer marketing platform founded by Guy Oseary, a longtime talent manager, and Cole Mason, a former fashion model, that connects labels and brands with TikTok creators. Creators with lesser followings can enter hundreds of different TikTok hashtag challenges listed on Pearpop. In a recent example, #frozenchallenge, the copyright holders of Madonna’s 1998 hit song “Frozen” offered cash prizes of up to fourteen hundred dollars for the most viewed videos that were made using a trap mix of the original song, in the hope, one assumes, of increasing the copyright’s value. (Oseary also manages Madonna.)

These hashtag challenges can themselves birth careers. Stacey Ryan, a twenty-two-year-old singer-songwriter from Montreal, blew up on TikTok

last December with an "open verse challenge," in which she sang the first line of the chorus of an unfinished song, "Don't Text Me When You're Drunk," and invited creators to contribute verses and to "duet" with her. Forty thousand creator videos later, hundreds of millions of people on TikTok had heard the hook, which led to her signing a seven-figure licensing deal with Island Records, a division of Universal. She released a version of the song she collaborated on with one creator, Zai1k. Ryan's manager, Nils Gums, the founder of Creative House L.A., told me, "The leverage she gained through TikTok has allowed us to keep her masters as well as her publishing."

The morning after Li posted her new song, she checked her phone as soon as she woke up. "Heartache" had amassed seven thousand views overnight, far outdistancing any of her previous videos.

"Wow! That's a lot more than thirty!" her mother exclaimed after Li had come rocketing downstairs, shrieking. "I was just bouncing around off the walls!" Li recalled. It was her first viral moment. The video hit a hundred thousand views by that evening, and was close to a million within a week.

Having gone viral once, Li tried to make it happen again through the spring and summer of 2021. What had made that particular video so successful with the algorithm? She studied the comments, and responded to them. Users were generous, without the snark of Twitter or any traces of envy, the green-eyed monster that stalks Instagram. In follow-up videos, Li acted as her fans' relationship coach, advising them on their own heartbreaks. "They feel like me," she said, of her online community. "A thousand me's" from all over the world, including many from India and the Philippines.

In August, Li posted a new song fragment titled "We Didn't Even Date," which produced a second viral moment. A few weeks later, she got a call from two young men at Interscope Records, in Los Angeles. Sean Lewow and Max Motley, both twenty-four years old, had seen Li's videos in their "For You" feeds, which, like everyone in A. & R. these days, they rely on to spot new talent.

The music industry has always welcomed young people with hustle, and being Gen Z TikTok natives gave Lewow and Motley special status with the

aging millennials they worked for. In addition to their Interscope gigs, Motley and Lewow were planning to start their own management company and label, with a focus on TikTok creators.

“We had two great conversations,” Lewow said, of their calls with Li. “We told her, ‘Yo, when these songs blow up on TikTok and you release them on YouTube, you’re not actually able to monetize,’ ” because YouTube pays so little for a stream. They thought that “We Didn’t Even Date” had potential, but it needed proper production, and they introduced Li to Joe Avio, an L.A.-based producer. They also suggested that Li “get back in the good graces of the algorithm,” as Lewow put it, by teasing bits of the music before releasing the finished song.

In December, 2021, Li posted a few lines from a new song, “Happening Again,” on her singular theme, unrequited love. “That song, when I first posted it, was not the biggest video I had,” Li told me. “But in the comments people seemed like they were way more engaged with that song.”

Li still wasn’t ready for a record contract; the idea of leaving the nurturing confines of TikTok had little appeal. Lewow and Motley told her about SoundOn, a music-distribution service that TikTok was planning to launch in the spring of 2022, with an emphasis on its D.I.Y. stars. That sounded perfect.

In the months leading up to the May, 2022, release of her album “Dance Fever,” Florence Welch, the songwriter and front woman for Florence and the Machine, kept hearing about TikTok from her label, Polydor. “What are you doing for TikTok? What are you doing for TikTok?” she was asked repeatedly, she told me. “And I was, like, ‘What the fuck is going on?’ ”

It was explained to Welch that if she made a TikTok video it might go viral, and that would help her streaming numbers. Welch responded to the label, “Oh, I actively don’t want to go viral. Anytime anything of mine has gone remotely viral, it’s filled me with dread. Any kind of attention that is not directly related to the work or an album, I don’t want it.”

For artists of a certain age and temperament (Welch is thirty-six, and has spoken about how social media has compounded her struggles with mental

health), it can be difficult to grasp why, after having labored many hours in the studio to polish a record to perfection, it is necessary to prerelease an iPhone video of themselves, recorded with lo-fi audio, engaged in an activity that is both natural and meme-able. Only a few years ago, most pop labels went to great lengths to prevent music bloggers or mastering engineers from leaking music before the official release day. (Hip-hop labels have long understood the power of strategic leaks.) These days, if there's not a viral prerelease video, the song might not get released at all.

"My fans, the people who follow me, are not going to believe that I just suddenly decided to do TikTok," Welch told the label. Until now, social media would not have been a problem for an artist of Welch's stature. The label would assign a social-media manager to rustle up content for her Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter feeds. But the user-generated culture of TikTok requires the artist to take part in the content to increase its chances of going viral. And, unlike Instagram, where artists have control over their image, on TikTok the creators are your collaborators, like it or not.

Digital natives like Charlie Puth, the thirty-one-year-old singer-songwriter who built a fan base on YouTube, thrive on TikTok. Puth shared bits of his hit "Light Switch" with his fans on the platform as he was writing it. But for other artists, especially those with established followings, TikTok is just another in a growing list of online marketing chores that keep them from making and playing music. "It's not what they signed up for," a younger industry executive at a major label told me. "There's a huge struggle between the artists who aren't talk-show hosts, and don't have content ideas every day, and those who do." He added, "Some artists want to be TikTok-trained. It's like hiring a personal trainer."

"I don't want to pretend to be someone else," Sheila Mohebpour, a twenty-seven-year-old digital marketing manager at Range Media Partners, a top talent-management firm in Los Angeles, told me, of working with artists on TikTok. "The artist has to pull their own weight." Mohebpour said that she doesn't think of what she does as marketing at all: "It's community-building."

Radio call-out research traditionally tests the chorus on audiences. But on TikTok any part of a song can go viral. "It's not necessarily the chorus," said

Tor Hermansen, of the production duo Stargate, who, with Mikkel Eriksen, produced several of Rihanna's biggest hits. "It could be the surprising moment that happens after the second chorus. Or a random, fun lyric line." The lyrics from Lizzo's "About Damn Time" that have inspired more than two million creator videos so far consist of the end of the chorus and the first lines of the second verse: "All right, it's about damn time / In a minute I'ma need a sentimental / Man or woman to pump me up / Feeling fussy, walkin' in my Balenci-ussy's / Tryna bring out the fabulous." TikTok savants like Mohebpour offer advice on what part of a song might be most likely to start a trend, but ultimately it is the users who will decide.

Finally, Welch agreed to make a TikTok video: "I was just, like, I am about to go into another meeting about this launch, and they are going to fucking ask me why haven't I done something." The video, in which the artist sings part of "My Love," a song from the album, did go mildly viral, and "Dance Fever" subsequently débuted at No. 7 on the *Billboard* album chart. Reading the comments from viewers, Welch grew attached to the TikTok community, "which I found to be anarchic and hilarious and weird in a way that I really enjoyed," she told me. She has continued to make TikTok videos, even though Polydor stopped asking for them.

"I feel like it's a platform on which you can be stranger," Welch said. "Like, if I just want to drink fake blood in a graveyard, TikTok is an environment that would embrace that."

Like CD Baby, DistroKid, and TuneCore, SoundOn is a music-distribution service that gives independent songwriters and artists access to streaming platforms, in exchange for a share of royalties, while allowing them to keep their copyrights. The name refers to the default audio setting on TikTok videos, which, in contrast to YouTube, is always on. In addition to distribution, SoundOn offers its artists best practices for keeping users' profoundly distracted attention. These include remaining authentic, finding a niche and staying with it, using SoundOn analytics to understand how many people are listening to your song and featuring it in their TikTok videos, and being able to react quickly if any TikTok data show that your song might be gaining traction somewhere on the planet.

Some see in SoundOn, and in ByteDance’s streaming platform, Resso, the emergence of a kind of parallel music industry, one that could erode the value of the traditional industry in a way that independent services like TuneCore, which lack the music-discovery tools and global reach of TikTok, never could. Barbara Jones, of Outshine Talent, speculated on ByteDance executives’ future plans: “They could say, ‘We have the artists, we have the fans, we have the distribution, we have the algorithm—there’s no reason why we aren’t setting up as a label with streaming.’ ” Resso currently operates in India, Indonesia, and Brazil, and is, according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, planning to expand to more countries, a fact that Ole Obermann, TikTok’s music chief, told me he could neither confirm nor deny. If Resso became available in the U.S., users could potentially stream songs without leaving TikTok at all.

Obermann, who works out of his home in Spain, elaborated in a recent Zoom call on how SoundOn helps artists like Katherine Li. “The entrance into the giant coliseum that is TikTok is perhaps a little intimidating for musical creators who are still really early on in that journey,” he said. “So let’s build a separate entrance only accessible to these undiscovered, unsigned creators. We keep an eye on them, work with them on their journey,” and, he explained, introduce them to influential creators who “match their sensibility, and who could make a video to increase their chances of success.”

SoundOn also puts its artists together with small and large brands. Until the advent of TikTok, advertisers had to either pay for an expensive synch license in order to use a well-known song or go with commercial music that the brand had commissioned itself. Now an advertiser can pay a TikTok creator or a SoundOn musician a relative pittance to use his original music and leverage his following, and hope to catch a viral wave on the platform. The ad, in turn, promotes the artist’s music. Obermann pointed to the SoundOn artist Nicky Youre and his summery, feel-good song “Sunroof”:

> I got my head out the sunroof
>
> I’m blasting our favorite tunes
>
> I only got one thing on my mind

The song first gained traction on TikTok in late 2021, because smaller brands were using it in ad campaigns. “Then creators with followings got onto it and the song hockey-sticked,” Obermann said—that is, the streaming numbers angled steeply upward. By mid-September, 2022, “Sunroof” was No. 4 on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

Among the brands that approached TikTok in search of music to use in ads in the spring of 2022 was American Eagle, the Gen Z-focussed clothing company. Craig Brommers, the company’s chief marketing officer, explained to me that his team was looking for a “back-to-school anthem” to build its fall advertising campaign around. “And while we have the brand strength and budget to work with most of the big music stars out there today,” he went on, “there was something in our head that said, ‘This Gen Z entrepreneurial spirit is something we should pursue, instead of just working with a Shawn Mendes or someone of that nature.’ ”

TikTok pitched several of its artists to American Eagle, including Katherine Li. “We were looking for someone who had an instant connection through the phone,” Brommers explained, “who didn’t feel manufactured, someone who felt he or she had a personal story, whose music was real but also leaning toward optimism.” After reviewing the SoundOn roster, Brommers’s team decided that “Katherine was just perfect for what we were looking for.”

Li had fewer than four hundred thousand followers at that point—a minuscule following compared with Charli D’Amelio, say, who currently has nearly a hundred and fifty million. But the TikTok of 2020 that spammed D’Amelio into everyone’s “For You” feed isn’t the TikTok of 2022. As more people have joined the platform, affinity groups have developed, which have grown into siloed subcultures. There’s Comedy TikTok, Football TikTok, Alt TikTok, Cooking TikTok, Conspiracy TikTok, and BookTok. What was once just TikTok is now referred to as Straight TikTok.

“TikTok shows you what you want to see,” Max Bernstein, the founder of the viral-marketing agency Muuser, told me. “So, if you’re targeting people who like cosplay and manga comics, you won’t even reach them with a video from Charli D’Amelio.” From a marketing perspective, a creator with a small but intensely engaged following who can start a trend at least semi-organically in her community could be preferable (and much cheaper) to a

creator with a huge following, like D’Amelio, whose ability to start trends “authentically” has diminished as her celebrity has grown; there’s now a D’Amelio-family reality show on Hulu. The snake has eaten its tail.

“This Gen Z audience isn’t stupid,” Brommers, who previously headed marketing at Juul, the e-cigarette company, told me. “They are fully aware that many creators are working with brands. But Gen Z also has a strong bullshit meter. If a creator is partnering with a brand that doesn’t make sense, they’ll call you out. And it can get ugly very quickly.”




*“I’d like to order one large pizza with traditional toppings that have stood the test of time, and two large riskier choices that everyone will hate.”*
*Cartoon by Asher Perlman*

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American Eagle asked Li to rewrite some of the lyrics of “Happening Again,” to mention the brand. The company also paid for a professionally produced, eleven-minute music video, shot in a former high school, in which Li—clad in the fall line—and a cast of extras act out her crush.

In late August, American Eagle launched a three-day hashtag challenge, with Li inviting creators to make music videos for her song, wearing their own American Eagle jeans. The winning video would be played on the company's Times Square storefront Jumbotron, and the winner would receive a three-thousand-dollar gift certificate. Lewow and Motley brokered the terms of the deal, under which American Eagle paid Li slightly more than a hundred thousand dollars.

When we spoke in early September, Brommers was awed by the numbers the challenge had produced. One and a half million creator videos had used the hashtag #AEJeansSoundOn. "It sounds crazy, but the challenge produced over three billion views," he said, taking into account all the views the creator videos generated. "That is a very big deal for us." He added, "This is a real kid. We could have gone a superstar route. But this seems extremely effective."

In the 1984 movie "Footloose," Kevin Bacon plays Ren, a teen-ager who moves to Bomont, a small, God-fearing town that has prohibited dancing and rock music; Ren convinces the city council to allow a senior dance, reversing the ban. When I asked Brendan Carr, one of four current Federal Communications commissioners, about his congressional testimony in July, in which he portrayed TikTok as a dire national-security threat, he began by referencing the movie: "I'm the guy who comes in and says, 'Stop the dancing!' "

The F.C.C. regulates certain types of network hardware that could compromise national security, but TikTok, being made of data, software, and math, lies beyond its jurisdiction. That hasn't prevented Carr, a Republican commissioner, from calling for the app to be banned from the Apple and Google app stores.

"You may say, 'I don't get it,' " Carr observed. " 'What's the national-security issue with popular dance videos being uploaded?' And what I say is: It's not about what you're uploading. That's just the sheep's clothing. Underneath that, TikTok really functions as a kind of sophisticated surveillance tool. It's collecting everything from search and browsing history to keystroke patterns and biometrics, including face prints and voice prints —that's an awful lot of data that you aren't choosing to upload." He added,

“China has the most sophisticated data operation in the world, which they use to control their own people. Why we would be O.K. with private, sensitive data on millions of Americans being fed into that surveillance operation is beyond me.” In Carr’s world view, TikTok isn’t “Footloose”; it’s “The Manchurian Candidate” with a sick beat.

ByteDance disputes these claims, and said through a spokesperson, “It is unfortunate that, despite sitting down with members of our policy team for a briefing on our privacy and security efforts, Commissioner Carr continues to push unfounded claims about our service that he knows to be false.”

In October, 2021, a TikTok official claimed in sworn congressional testimony that TikTok user data gathered in the U.S. are stored in the U.S. and Singapore, not in China, implying that no one in China has access to that information. But in June, 2022, Emily Baker-White, a former policy manager at Spotify turned journalist, published a story in BuzzFeed News on leaked audio she’d reviewed from a September, 2021, ByteDance meeting. According to Baker-White, a U.S.-based member of TikTok’s Trust and Safety department could be heard saying, “Everything is seen in China.”

In response, TikTok insisted, “We now route a hundred per cent of U.S. user traffic to Oracle Cloud Infrastructure”—a service run by Oracle, which is based in Austin, Texas—“and we are continuing to work on additional safeguards on U.S. data for improved peace of mind for our community.”

“The assurances from TikTok were nothing other than gaslighting,” Carr told me, referring to Baker-White’s reporting. (Baker-White is now at *Forbes*, where she continues to cover ByteDance and TikTok.) I brought up ByteDance’s engineering project to sequester TikTok data within the U.S., in the Oracle Cloud Infrastructure, internally named Project Texas. In addition, ByteDance has pledged to allow independent auditors access to the workings of the TikTok algorithm.

“Does this alleviate your concerns?” I asked.

“No,” Carr said.

When I asked Li recently if she was worried about her TikTok data being misused in any way, she said, “It’s not a concern of mine.” We were having dinner at a sushi restaurant in Oakville. Li had begun her second year at college, where she’s pursuing a major in commerce, which she thought would be easier to juggle with a music career than medical school.

Although Li’s parents told me they were pleased with her American Eagle payday, there was a difference, at least in their minds, between a career as an artist and one as a brand pitch person; Li hadn’t traded medical school for that. As long as their daughter remained at U.T. and got her degree, Maggie Li told me, she would be content. Accounting, her field, was also Katherine’s focus.

In the restaurant, however, Li told me that she might not finish her degree, at least not in consecutive years. When she said, “The window of opportunity is open now,” I could hear Lewow and Motley’s counsel.

In late August, Li performed her music in front of an audience for the first time, at School Night!, an L.A. industry showcase where Billie Eilish had played one of her first shows. “Crush(ed),” an E.P. of six original songs, came to streaming platforms in mid-October, and one, “Never Had a Chance,” quickly topped ten million streams. Down the road, Li needed to hire an experienced manager to complement her team of Lewow and Motley, as well as a publicist and a touring agent—the kind of support that, in the old days, an artist with a following the size of Li’s would already have.

“Touring!” Li said nervously. She bowed her head and shut her eyes, daunted by the prospect of leaving the TikTok incubator, going on the road, and actually selling tickets to her shows, still the ultimate metric of engagement.

In the meantime, she would be posting on TikTok every other day, to stay in the good graces of the algorithm. I mentioned the unchecked box next to one of this year’s goals on the list in her bedroom: “Read Three Books.”

“I know!” Li said. “I’ve still got time!” ♦

*An earlier version of this article mischaracterized the firm Range Media Partners.*

**By Eric Rosenblum**

**By Max Norman**

**By Simon Parkin**

**By Robert Moor**

# Books


- In Praise of Parasites?
- Briefly Noted

# In Praise of Parasites?

We think of them with revulsion, but a new book wants us to appreciate their redeeming qualities.

By Jerome Groopman



A vacation in the Catskills, one of those beautiful summer days which seem to go on forever, with family friends down at a local pond. I must have been six. I waded around happily, in and out of the tall grasses that grew in the murky water, but when I emerged onto the shore my legs were studded with small black creatures. “Leeches! Don’t touch them!” my mother yelled. I stood terrified. My parents’ friends lit cigarettes and applied the glowing ends to the parasites, which exploded, showering me with blood.

Mom was right, up to a point. If you rip a leech off, you’ll probably leave its jaws behind in the skin, thereby heightening the risk of infection. But her friends’ remedy—back when people smoked, it was practically folk wisdom—isn’t advisable, either. A leech contains, in addition to your blood, plenty of things you don’t want in an open wound. There *are* ways to safely remove a leech, but almost any source you consult will also make a surprising suggestion: just leave it there. Once the creature has finished making a meal of you—in around twenty minutes—it will drop off, sated. In the meantime,

the guest, however unwelcome, is likely doing you no harm. After all, treatment with leeches was a staple of medicine for millennia, and has even been resurgent in recent decades, in applications where the anticoagulant properties of leech saliva are beneficial.

Sensible advice, but why does it feel so wrong? Simply put, we are taught to think of parasites with revulsion. "They are seen as blood suckers, freeloaders, scroungers, flunkies, deadbeats, and the worst kind of groupies," Scott Gardner, Judy Diamond, and Gabor Racz write in "Parasites" (Princeton), an approachable and often fascinating primer on the subject. The word "parasite," as the authors note, comes from the Greek for "next to food"; what they don't quite say is that it has always conveyed moral opprobrium. The biological meaning emerged only in the eighteenth century, in the wake of the scientific revolution. For ancient Greek and Roman satirists, the term denoted what many of us now assume to be the figurative meaning: a sponger, a schnorrer, a person dining at someone else's table, at someone else's expense. "Like rats we always eat other people's food," a shameless hanger-on says in one of Plautus' comedies. Parasites, quite literally, have always had a bad name.

**The Best Books of 2022**

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From my childhood right up through my medical training and beyond, the word carried a frightening resonance for me. In a course on parasitology, I got another look at leeches (now through a microscope) and also studied a variety of predatory worms. I learned that one of my favorite foods, gefilte fish, can, if inadequately cooked, harbor the tapeworm *Diphyllobothrium latum*. If the worm gets into the human gut, it interferes with the absorption of nutrients and can cause Vitamin $B_{12}$ deficiency. During my internship, at Mass General, I evaluated a botanist who had recently returned from Africa with a fever of a hundred and four, shaking uncontrollably; looking through the microscope at his blood, I saw swarms of *Plasmodia* protists, the genus of single-cell parasite that causes malaria. In Boston in those days, a case like this was a rarity; there were lengthy discussions about the various strains of malaria, and how sickle-cell mutations could mitigate the disease. Sadly, my colleagues and I were to become far more familiar with life-threatening parasitic infections. In the early years of the *AIDS* epidemic, I lost many of my patients to them. An *AIDS* patient's devastated immune system might allow the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, carried by cats, to form brain abscesses; *Cryptosporidium* infection, which normally infests cattle, caused wasting from relentless diarrhea.

Even when the victims aren't people, there is something about parasites that arouses appalled fascination. The authors of "Parasite" mention the monster

in the film “Alien” as a kind of archetype of the gross-outs in which the field abounds. There’s *Cymothoa exigua*, a louse that destroys fishes’ tongues and then lives in their mouths, performing a tongue’s functions while gorging itself. The fungus *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, which propagates itself by taking over ants’ bodies, has sufficient notoriety that it appears in the video game The Last of Us, where it zombifies people rather than ants.

By and large, Gardner, Diamond, and Racz resist filling their book with nightmarish creatures. As researchers at the University of Nebraska and its affiliated state museum, which has a large parasitological collection, they want to give us a new understanding of parasites, to counter our unalloyed horror and instill a more scientifically nuanced view. They do this by widening our focus, encouraging us to think in terms of ecosystems and evolutionary history. They write about how parasites may keep populations of species in balance, the ways in which they are imperilled by climate change, and what we owe them in terms of our understanding of genetics, organism development, and ancient human migrations. “Dependent relationships between different species are the norm among living organisms,” they write. “And these have evolved in every imaginable form.” The story the authors tell is one of coexistence, involving trade-offs for both parasite and host. (They mostly steer clear of parasitoids, parasites whose survival involves eventually killing their host.) Seen this way, parasitism emerges as no more or less appalling than the strategies adopted by so-called free-living species—predation, say, or grazing, or photosynthesis.

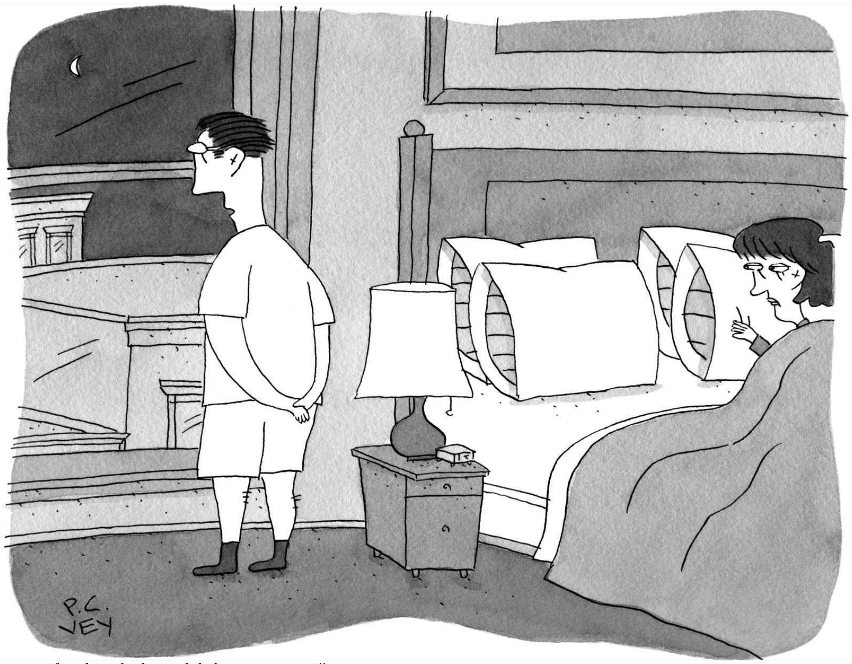
Few of us realize how ubiquitous parasites are in the earth’s ecosystem. “It has been said that every species of animal is either a parasite or a host,” the authors write. “Among all known animals, there are more species that live as parasites than are free-living.” Parasitic life styles exist in all major animal groups, with the single exception of echinoderms, the phylum containing starfish and sea urchins. Parasitism is rife, too, among plants and, as you’d expect, fungi. Many organisms are what are termed “obligate parasites,” unable to complete their life cycle in the absence of a host—and obligate parasites include viruses, which, some scientists contend, aren’t even alive until they hijack a host’s cells.

Among the parasitic infections that affect humans, a large portion are caused by various species of nematodes, a phylum of worms. Nematodes account

for four-fifths of all animal species and are so plentiful that, the authors write, one could “line them up end to end and have nematodes in every meter across our entire galaxy.” Envisioning a “parasite Olympics,” the authors award their gold medal to the nematode *Ascaris lumbricoides*, which has succeeded in establishing residence in the intestines of a sixth of the human population, more than a billion people. The worm causes a tropical disease, ascariasis, whose symptoms include fever, abdominal pain, cough, vomiting, and weight loss. The success of the species comes in part from the fact that, unusually for a parasite, it doesn’t require an intermediate host—the way that malaria, say, needs a mosquito in order to infect a human. Instead, *Ascaris* is transmitted from person to person via contaminated feces. (Throughout the book, illustrations by Brenda Lee manage to portray such life cycles clearly without being too extravagantly disgusting, and the authors highlight the importance of “access to shoes, clean water, and adequate sanitation” in fighting nematode diseases.)

Once inside a human host, the adult female *Ascaris* produces some two hundred thousand eggs a day, each of which can survive for decades. Though the eggs are microscopic, the authors point out that the eggs produced in a single host in the course of a year weigh roughly the same as two sugar cubes. Multiplying this by the number of infected people worldwide, they calculate an astonishing biomass of sixty-six million kilograms—equivalent to that of eight thousand adult male elephants or three hundred and fifty adult blue whales. When a person experiences an *Ascaris* infection, eggs travel from the intestine and into the blood, the liver, the heart, and the lungs, penetrating the trachea, through which they are swallowed, ending up back in the gut. There they mature into worms a foot long, which mate and produce more eggs.

Another star in the human-parasite Olympics is the whipworm, *Trichuris trichiura*, which can cause gastrointestinal disorders, impaired growth, and abnormal cognitive development. It earns a medal not only because of its prevalence—there are more than two million cases in the southeastern United States alone—but also because of its long history of infecting people. After the frozen body of a Neolithic man known as Ötzi was found in the Alps, in 1991, it was discovered that when he was killed by a flint arrowhead, more than five thousand years ago, he was suffering from a whipworm infection.

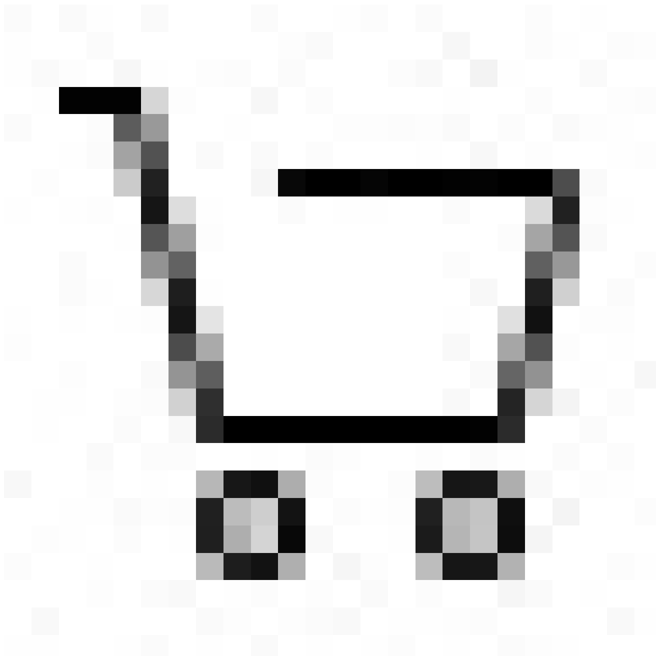



*"I do some of my best thinking while keeping you up."*
*Cartoon by P. C. Vey*

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Even parasites that don't infect people can harm us. In Ireland in the eighteen-forties, a potato blight caused by the parasitic pathogen *Phytophthora infestans* resulted in a famine that killed around a million people and led nearly two million more to emigrate. The fungus is thought to have originated in the Americas and to have been brought to Europe on ships, and the happenstance of this path of infection leads the authors to sound a note of caution: "Modern agriculture, in which each individual food plant is genetically identical to the next one in the row, is highly vulnerable to the worst effects of parasitic fungi."

Why aren't our bodies better at combatting parasites? The answer has to do with adaptation. Nematodes, for instance, have evolved to outwit our immune system, switching off inflammation that would otherwise purge them. They produce molecules that make the parasites invisible to our immune surveillance. For the authors, the wonder of parasite adaptation is perhaps best illustrated by the tapeworm, of which about twenty thousand species are known. Many have suckers at the front end, to attach to the bowel of the host; some have hooks that can be engaged or released depending on whether the worm needs to move with or against the peristaltic flow of the intestine itself. But the tapeworm's true "superpower" is its long, flat body, which is made up of a chain of reproductive segments. The result is a parasite that, as the authors put it, is both "inventively self-contained and

massively reproductive." The tapeworm is essentially modular, able to break itself into "thousands of little packages, each containing up to hundreds of thousands of eggs." This inherent flexibility has enabled tapeworms to adapt to a huge variety of hosts. Some tapeworms are "tiny stubs no more than a millimeter in length"; others, such as those that infect blue whales, can grow to more than a hundred feet.

In one of their more fanciful passages, the authors imagine a whale's infection through the eyes of Jonah, who, according to the Hebrew Bible, was swallowed by a "big fish," interpreted in recent centuries as a whale. The experience would have been far from solitary, apparently: "The first creatures that Jonah met in the whale's gut would have been tens of thousands of relatively small nematode worms. Later on, he might have come across the 30 meter tapeworm known as *Tetragonoporus calyptocephalus*." The fact that it's impossible to imagine a human surviving in such conditions is the point, of course: tapeworms, which need very little oxygen, are beautifully adapted to their ecological niche. Jonah was lucky to have been spat out after three days, but any tapeworm could have happily spent its whole life inside the whale. Indeed, the authors note, tapeworms have no internal limits on their life span: they can live for as long as their host is alive.

The adaptability of parasites is only part of the story, however. After all, we, too, evolve, and mutations in our DNA can provide resistance to some pathogens. But such adaptations can entail costs as well as benefits. The plasmodia that cause malaria have been attacking our red blood cells for millennia, and some people have developed genetic mutations that confer some resistance. Unfortunately, these mutations are also associated with a couple of blood-cell disorders—sickle-cell disease and thalassemia. Resistance to malaria, in other words, appears to come at the price of having blood that is less able to carry oxygen.

Another example is the parasite *Trypanosoma brucei*, which causes the disease African trypanosomiasis, commonly known as sleeping sickness. This protist, as the authors mention, is transmitted to people via the bite of the tsetse fly; unless treated, it will fatally overwhelm the central nervous system. Down the hall from my office is the laboratory of Martin Pollak, one of the scientists whose work has led to a startling discovery related to this

parasite. Some people of African descent appear to have developed resistance to sleeping sickness, because of variants in the gene APOL1, one of several genes that govern innate immunity. Again, there's a cost. Pollak and his colleagues have found that the APOL1 variants correlated with an increased risk for high blood pressure and certain types of kidney disease. In the parts of sub-Saharan Africa most prone to sleeping sickness, this genetic trade-off could be worthwhile. But the disease is not endemic anywhere outside Africa, which means that some members of the African diaspora may now pay dearly for an immunity that they no longer need.

This kind of evolutionary arms race highlights one of the book's most remarkable points: the extent to which we and our parasites have co-evolved. Fossil evidence shows that an ancestor of *Ascaris lumbricoides*—the nematode gold medallist—was infesting iguanodons a hundred and twenty million years ago. Switching hosts is an evolutionarily risky gambit, as the authors explain, but *Ascaris* "got lucky," colonizing the small furry multituberculates that, after the extinction of the dinosaurs, gave rise to modern mammals.

The evidence for such hypotheses mostly comes in the form of fossilized feces, known as coprolites. For paleoarcheologists, coprolites provide vital information about early human migration, thanks to another kind of nematode, the pinworm. Pinworms rarely cause serious illness in humans, and as we migrated across the globe pinworms came along for the ride. Analysis of these fellow-travellers, preserved in human coprolites, can produce surprising results. In certain regions of South America, pinworms display marked genetic differences from those in other areas, leading some researchers to hypothesize a settling of the Americas in which migrations from Asia across the Bering land bridge may have been supplemented, at some stage, by other influxes, perhaps of people coming by boat from Micronesia and beyond.

Gardner, Diamond, and Racz repeatedly urge the reader to relinquish the prevalent perception of parasitism as uniformly toxic. Although, "in theory, parasitism describes a long-term dependent relationship between different species where one benefits and the other is harmed," they write, "in practice, parasitism can range from deadly effects to cases where both parasite and

host derive benefits." When the two different species both benefit from their interaction, the situation is termed "mutualism."

This type of symbiosis can develop for several reasons, including the need for nutrition, shelter, protection, or reproduction. Anyone who has hiked in a forest may have noted lichens formed from a union of fungi and algae, without realizing that these are prime examples of mutualism. Here, the algae provide sugars, via photosynthesis, to the fungi, and the fungi in turn provide the algae with water and stability, as well as protection from UV radiation and predators. A more familiar example, not cited by the authors, is the relationship between bees and flowers, which depend on each other to survive. Flowering plants rely on insects to pollinate them—bees, in particular, are prominent pollinators that feed on flowers' nectar and nourish their larvae with pollen. We have a mutually beneficial relationship with certain bacteria that reside in our bowel or on our skin. They derive food and shelter, while we obtain nutrients and gain protection from pathogens.

Less generous in evolution and adaptation is "commensalism," a situation where one partner benefits and the other is unaffected—neither harmed nor helped. Most familiar may be birds and trees: trees provide shelter and protection; birds, in most cases, don't really benefit their hosts, but they don't damage them, either. Other examples cited by the authors include pea crabs, which live in the shells of oysters, and shrimp that spend their lives inside glass sponges.

Humans appear to have incorporated products of beneficial parasitic infection. The endosymbiosis theory holds that we may have co-opted parasitic bacteria that are now essential to life. Early in the evolution of single-cell organisms, bacterial parasites that were not destructive entered cells. These parasites ultimately became mitochondria, the organelles within the cell which produce energy—a structure essential to animal life.

The authors end on the effects of climate change and other noxious outcomes of modern civilization. They decry the fact that "the planet is losing species faster than scientists can name them—much like burning a library without knowing the names or the contents of the books." More than twenty million species may be lost because of our destructive behaviors, which lead to deforestation, spillage of toxic chemicals, and global warming.

And, the authors stress, our knowledge of earth's biodiversity is still so partial that many species will become extinct before we even learn of their existence. This is particularly true of parasites, since only a fraction of them have been described. Given that parasites help keep life in balance, their loss threatens to further destabilize the earth's ecosystem.

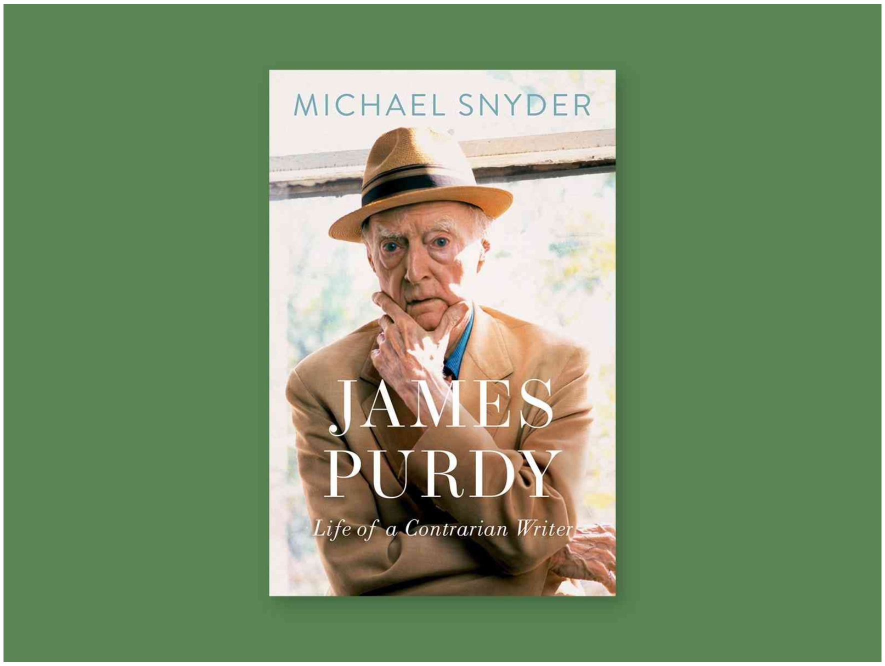
As the authors emphasize, "parasitism is a lifestyle," and every animal species is in some way a parasite or a host. This insight should cause us to evaluate how much of our behavior on earth resembles that of the predatory parasites we abhor, harming our host, Mother Nature, and, thereby, ourselves. We should be guided by the positive paradigm of parasitism—that of mutualism—and build a relationship in which we contribute to the earth's sustainability while benefitting from its bounty. ♦

**By Nicole Rose Whitaker**

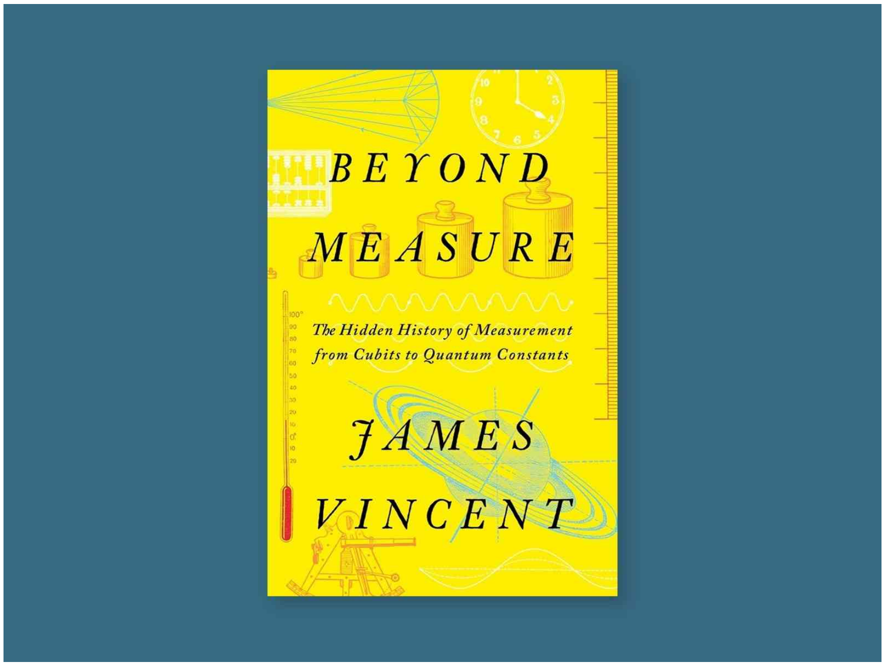
**By Jessica Winter**

**By Margaret Talbot**

**By Marion Renault**




**James Purdy**, *by Michael Snyder (Oxford)*. This biography of a cult writer and pioneer of queer fiction tries to reconcile mainstream neglect of his work with the acclaim he received from authors including Tennessee Williams and Susan Sontag. Purdy, who once insisted that "all of my work is a criticism of the United States," specialized in a kind of "outlaw fiction." His treatment of "passing" and his use of Black vernacular made Langston Hughes assume that he was Black. Snyder takes us from Purdy's childhood on an Ohio farm to his final years in New York, in a tantalizing portrait of a man with a talent for alienating colleagues, but also for conveying "a tragic sense of life couched in dark laughter."




**Beyond Measure**, *by James Vincent (Norton)*. This book uses a seemingly simple question—How did our units of measurement originate?—to deliver a profound reflection on how we experience and describe the world. The author's inquiry takes him from Cairo, where he visits a thousand-year-old device for measuring the Nile's floodwaters, to an iron cabinet in Paris that houses the standard metre and kilogram produced after the French Revolution. If measurement constitutes, as Vincent believes, "a mirror to society itself," then it is perhaps no surprise that its history is one of both ingenuity and oppression. Ultimately, Vincent writes, our "frameworks of order that seem inviolable because of their deep roots in tradition and authority are as changeable as anything else in life."

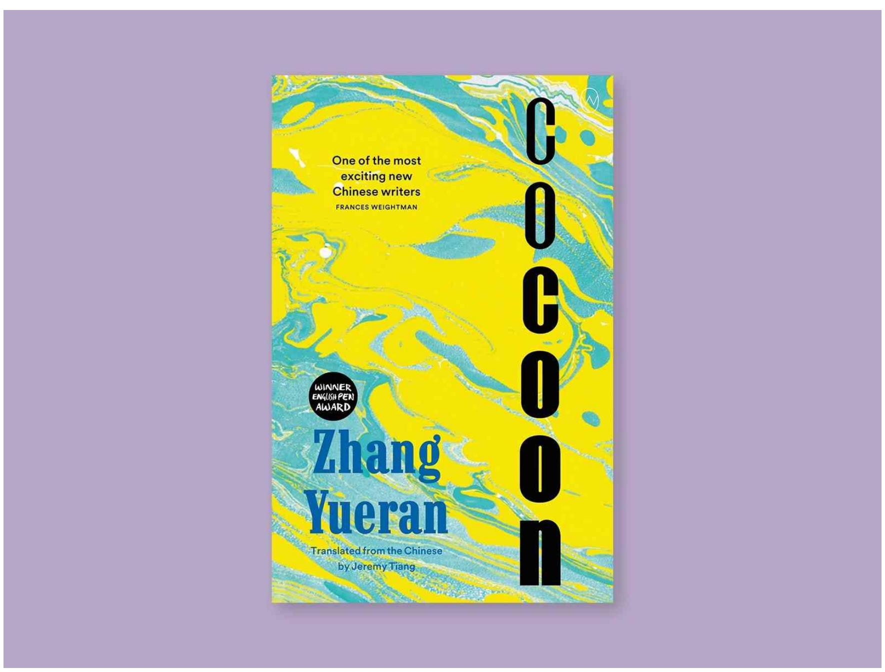
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# The Best Books of 2022



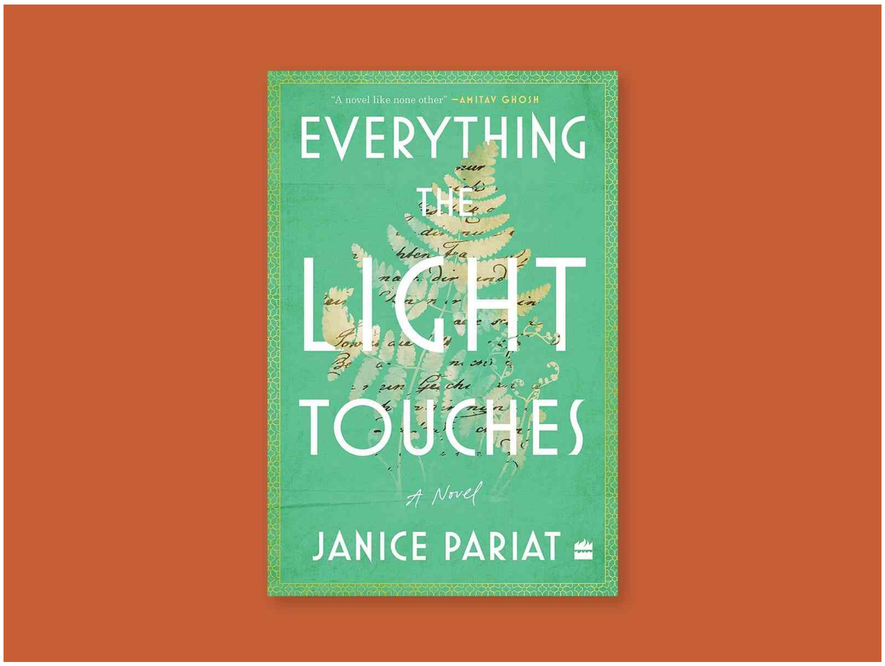
*Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.*

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**Cocoon**, *by Zhang Yueran, translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang (World Editions)*. In this multilayered novel about the sins and traumas of China's past, two childhood friends reunite in their provincial home town after years apart. In the course of a winter night, their alternating

monologues sift through their family histories, circling a fateful moment during the Cultural Revolution which left one man's grandfather comatose and set the other's up for an eminent medical career. As the two friends' fortunes become increasingly intertwined, they also trade stories of their childhoods in the eighties, and the historical weight shouldered by their generation. "Blood ties are a form of violence, the way they yoke together people who feel nothing for each other," Zhang writes.




**Everything the Light Touches**, *by Janice Pariat (HarperVia)*. Four characters embark on journeys that bring them into close communion with nature, in this philosophical novel. A young Indian woman finds a sense of purpose in her country's rural east. In the Edwardian era, an English botanist journeys to the same remote area, searching for a mythical tree. Carl Linnaeus, the father of biological classification, travels through Lapland, and Goethe develops his framework for perceiving the unity of a natural world in which "all is leaf." Goethe's rejection of the scientific wish to define nature and the mercantile one to extract value from it provides the book's intellectual core. As one character muses, "How much harder to see things, in continuity, in extension, in expansion, as uninterruptedness."

**By The New Yorker**

**By The New Yorker**

**By The New Yorker**

**By Joshua Rothman**

## Brave New World


- Sam Bankman-Fried Made the DealBook Summit Into a Nail-Biter

# Sam Bankman-Fried Made the DealBook Summit Into a Nail-Biter

Mark Zuckerberg, Mike Pence, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Reed Hastings turned up, but would S.B.F. be a no-show?

**By Andrew Marantz**



If you made a list of the dozen or so faces most likely to be emblazoned on a dartboard, it might overlap with the lineup of speakers at the DealBook Summit, held this past Wednesday above a high-end mall, in Columbus Circle. So when a picket line formed outside it was impossible to guess who the picketers were there to protest. Maybe Mark Zuckerberg, the C.E.O. of Meta, or Shou Chew, the C.E.O. of TikTok, both well-known harvesters of data and attention? Or could it have been Mike Pence, the former Vice-President and January 6th assassination target, who was in town to promote a new memoir and hint at a possible Presidential run? Or Benjamin Netanyahu, also hawking a book, who recently dodged corruption charges by being re-re-re-re-reëlected as the Prime Minister of Israel? Or—the Occam's-razor answer—Sam Bankman-Fried, the freshly disgraced crypto bro who may turn out to be the biggest huckster since Bernie Madoff?

None of the above. “Let’s remind ’em: New York is a union town,” Chris Smalls, the president of the Amazon Labor Union, chanted into a bullhorn. They were protesting Andy Jassy, the C.E.O. of Amazon, which has been accused of union-busting.

Jassy sat onstage in a blazer and jeans, five stories above the picket line, looking unruffled. He was being interviewed by Andrew Ross Sorkin, the editor of DealBook, a business vertical owned by the *Times*, in the acoustically pristine concert hall normally used by Jazz at Lincoln Center. Behind them, visible through a fifty-foot-tall window, was the Trump International Hotel and a digital billboard advertising “*CRYPTO REWARDS*.” “As a retailer of content to hundreds of millions of customers with a lot of different viewpoints, we have to allow access to those viewpoints,” Jassy said. The viewpoints he was referring to—that the Holocaust was not so bad, that only Black people can be real Jews, and that the fake Jews control the media—are viewpoints presented in a movie, streaming on Amazon, that Kyrie Irving recently shared with the world; Jassy was confirming that he had no intention of taking the movie down, or of marking it with a warning.

Between interviews, the P.A. system piped in looping Muzak with melodramatic taiko drums and a chord progression reminiscent of “The Final Countdown.” Reed Hastings, the co-C.E.O. of Netflix, praised Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter and one of the few dartboard-shortlisters not in attendance: “I’m amazed that people are so nitpicky on him.” Janet Yellen, the Treasury Secretary, confirmed a story about how she learned to smoke weed (practice, practice, practice). Zuckerberg Zoomed in, and he also appeared in a pre-taped bit in which he and Sorkin put on V.R. headsets and made small talk in the metaverse. “I’m surprised I’m saying this, but it feels more human,” Sorkin said. He and Zuckerberg tried for a fist bump and missed.

Most of the moguls came off as relaxed, even a bit punchy, perhaps because they knew that, whatever gaffes they made, they couldn’t top the elephant in the room. During an interview with Larry Fink, the C.E.O. of the investment firm BlackRock, Sorkin said, “As you know very well, we’re going to talk to Sam Bankman-Fried later. Or so we think.” Bankman-Fried’s cryptocurrency exchange, FTX, was founded in 2019, soared to a thirty-two-

billion-dollar valuation, and then, last month, flamed out in spectacular fashion, obliterating more than a billion dollars of its customers' savings. At one point, Bankman-Fried, who is thirty, had a net worth of twenty-six billion dollars; he is now worth about a hundred thousand (or so he says), and he is presumably about to be in a lot of legal trouble. (Bankman-Fried has not been charged with a crime and has denied committing fraud.) Sorkin pointed out that many major firms, including BlackRock, had invested in FTX without doing enough due diligence. "Twenty-four million dollars," Fink said, dismissively—couch-cushion money. "Could we have been misled in the small little investment we did? Sure." Ben Affleck, arguably the speaker with the most star power and the least actual power, was there to promote Artists Equity, his new production company, yet even he couldn't resist taking a dig at the headliner. "Why are all the Justice Department people here today?" he said. This was a joke—it *was* a joke, right?—but Sorkin didn't touch it.

The elephant, it turned out, wasn't in the room, or even in the country. Bankman-Fried was in the Bahamas. In the hallways and greenrooms, people chattered about whether he would cancel at the last minute. Hastings, of Netflix, said that it was "legal cringiness" for S.B.F. to keep giving interviews: "His parents must be, like, 'Oh, my God.' " (Bankman-Fried's parents are both Stanford Law professors; he has said that "my lawyers" have advised him, futilely, to stay quiet.) "He has nothing to gain from this," Joe Appelbaum said. "If he thinks he can keep bullshitting his way out of trouble at this point, he's delusional." Appelbaum is the president of the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association. "I'm half a professional gambler, half a farmer," he continued. "I'm pretty tech-forward, but most of the crypto stuff sounds pretty nuts to me."

The interview with Bankman-Fried was to be the Summit's big finale. The Summit had hired Freestyle Love Supreme Plus, a troupe of comedic freestyle rappers, to take the stage afterward and sum up the day's highlights and lowlights in an improvised rap—or, if Bankman-Fried didn't show, to fill the extra time. "There's that old saying about how only the jester can speak truth to the king," Anthony Veneziale, one of the freestylers, said. "Our role is to bring the authenticity, bring the fun." Veneziale was in a greenroom, wearing a suit and a fedora. He co-founded Freestyle Love Supreme in 2004, with his friend Lin-Manuel Miranda. The group has since

performed on hundreds of stages (Broadway, Vegas, corporate workshops with Pfizer and Goldman Sachs), but this seemed like a uniquely tough gig: either vamp indefinitely or wrench the audience's mood from "Ponzi-scheme Schadenfreude" to "hyped for cocktail hour."

Also in the greenroom were four other members of the troupe: Aneesa (Young Nees) Folds, Mark (Mandible) Martin, Alan (Scanner) Markley, and Steph (Mos Steph) Rae. They turned to a closed-circuit TV: Pence was taking the stage. Veneziale began impersonating Pence's pinched, pompous bearing. "Isn't it incredible how quickly you can tell when someone is working so hard to say nothing?" he said. Onstage, Pence was touting "the accomplishments of the Trump-Pence Administration," although, he granted, "it obviously didn't end well." Guffaws in the greenroom. Pence spent most of the interview equivocating, but when Sorkin asked him about Donald Trump's recent dinner with the anti-Semitic rapper Kanye West and his Holocaust-denier friend Nick Fuentes, Pence spoke clearly: "President Trump was wrong to give a Holocaust denier, a white nationalist, a seat at the table."

"I think we've got what we need," Veneziale said, slapping his knees. "Let's go do warmups?"

They went to a bigger room to loosen up: lip trills, vocal runs. A stage manager came in and informed them, "We're gonna bring you backstage early, just in case we need you out there on short notice." Another TV monitor showed the empty stage, where, in a few moments, Sorkin either would or wouldn't speak to Bankman-Fried. Through the giant window, night had fallen, heightening the drama. The Muzak loop played one last time. The final countdown. "Pin-drop vibes," Veneziale said.

Against all logic and legal advice, Bankman-Fried didn't cancel. "I'm deeply sorry about what happened," he said, in an affectless voice, hanging his head. Sorkin asked if he had used his trading firm, Alameda Research, to gamble away FTX customers' funds. "I didn't knowingly commingle funds," Bankman-Fried mumbled.

"Did he say 'I did' or 'I didn't'?" Veneziale said.

“He kind of swallowed the ‘didn’t,’ ” Folds said.

Onscreen, Bankman-Fried nervously jiggled his right leg. “Mostly what I’m getting from this is ‘reprimanded schoolchild,’ ” Veneziale said.

“When did the commingling of assets begin?” Sorkin asked.

“Damn, he’s ripping him to shreds,” Nadia Delisfort, one of the group’s producers, said.

The stage manager led the performers to a waiting area behind the stage. “If you want to ask me anything, now’s the time,” she said.

“What’s your favorite color?” Folds said.

“Will Sam Bankman-Fried be brought up on charges?” Veneziale said. The sound of audience laughter wafted in. “What’d he say?” Veneziale asked.

“ ‘I had a bad month,’ ” Delisfort said.

A countdown clock in front of Sorkin reached zero, but he kept going. “Crypto, ultimately, is actually about trust,” he said. “But it seems—when you read the stories, it sounds like a bunch of kids who were on Adderall having a sleepover party.” The interview went ten minutes over, then twenty minutes over. The freestylers were encouraged to keep their performance short. Eventually, Sorkin said, “Sam Bankman-Fried, I want to thank you for this interview,” and the audience members lunged for the exits. “Before everybody goes,” Sorkin continued, “we have one last little surprise, just to maybe put a smile on everybody’s face.” About two-thirds of the audience was gone by the time the freestylers got to the stage. “We’re going to try to make this as abbreviated as possible,” Veneziale said. Martin started beatboxing. Veneziale did his Pence impression (pinched face) and Bankman-Fried impression (jiggling leg). After the song, the remainder of the audience escaped to a cocktail hour, where complimentary copies of Mike Pence’s memoir, “So Help Me God,” were arrayed on tables. “You serve the needs of the room,” Veneziale said. “And the need of that room was for us to wrap it up.” ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

# Comment

- **After the January 6th Committee**

# After the January 6th Committee

It will cease to exist, as a result of the Republicans' regaining control of the House. Can the committee's work move forward without the committee itself?

By Amy Davidson Sorkin




This summer, shortly before a jury in Texas ordered Alex Jones, the conspiracy peddler, to pay forty-nine million dollars in damages to the parents of one of the first graders killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School, there was a legal scuffle over a piece of evidence. Jones's defense team had accidentally sent the parents' lawyer, Mark Bankston, a digital copy of the data on Jones's phone—a lapse that Bankston had revealed in a cross-examination of Jones. Jones's lawyer F. Andino Reynal belatedly pleaded with Judge Maya Guerra Gamble to keep the materials out of view. Bankston said that this might be a problem. "I've been asked by the January 6th committee to turn the documents over," he told the court, and he was ready to do so. "Well, I don't know if you get to stop that anyway," Judge Gamble told Reynal, with a laugh.

Jones was of interest to the committee because of the noisy role he had played in the events leading up to the assault on the Capitol. He had hyped

Donald Trump's tweet urging supporters to be at his "wild" January 6th rally as "the most important call to action on domestic soil since Paul Revere and his ride in 1776"; Jones had attended himself, toting a megaphone. Part of the committee's work has been to map out the Trumpist ecosystem of right-wing media, extremist groups, Republican officials, Fox News favorites, legal grifters, and even pillow salesmen. Jones was, in fact, questioned by the committee—one of more than a thousand witnesses it interviewed—and said afterward that he'd taken the Fifth Amendment. But he wasn't the only prominent person telling Trump's followers that they were victims of a fraud: many of those who did so held, and still hold, elected office.

The conundrum now is whether it was a mistake to think, as Judge Gamble suggested, that the January 6th committee couldn't be stopped. It will cease to exist by the beginning of the year, as a result of the Republicans' regaining control of the House. Four of the committee's nine members will not be returning to Congress, including Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, the Republican vice-chair, and Elaine Luria, a Democrat from Virginia. To put it another way, the question will be whether they and their colleagues have built a strong enough foundation for the committee's work—a true historical reckoning with the events of January 6th—to move forward without the committee itself.

The idea that the committee could get everything it wanted was, of course, always an illusion. It had to go to court to enforce a number of its subpoenas, and, notably, pursued criminal charges of contempt of Congress against Steve Bannon, Trump's former adviser, whose sentence of four months in prison is on hold, pending an appeal. The committee met on Friday about possible additional criminal referrals; in October, it voted to subpoena Trump's testimony, but he is fighting the summons. And although aides to Vice-President Mike Pence met with the committee, Pence himself—who on January 6th refused to give in to Trump's demands that he throw out electoral votes—declined to do so. "Congress has no right to my testimony," he told Margaret Brennan, of CBS News, last month. He added, "The partisan nature of the January 6th committee has been a disappointment to me." Some members of the mob at the Capitol wanted Pence dead. But even someone who put his life on the line to stop a coup might not be eager to explore how that day came about, and what it says about his party. The committee, for whatever reason, did not subpoena him.

Kevin McCarthy, the leader of the House Republicans, did get a subpoena, and simply defied it, as did several of his colleagues. McCarthy is trying to become Speaker of the House, for which he'll need the votes of his caucus's most extreme members. Perhaps in service of that effort, he sent Representative Bennie Thompson, of Mississippi, the committee's Democratic chair, a letter last week threatening to investigate the investigators. He instructed Thompson to preserve all evidence, "not merely the information that comports with your political agenda," and hinted at a possibility of the committee's breaking the law.

For all of that, the committee produced more than twenty hours of televised hearings that offered a sharply focussed look at an effort by Trump to hold on to power unconstitutionally. It also produced significant new insights—for example, regarding the "fake electors" scheme, which a federal judge, in a case involving a committee subpoena, called "a coup in search of a legal theory." Next term, Congress and many statehouses will be replete with Republican election deniers, but there will nonetheless be fewer than had been expected. Perhaps that is partly to the committee's credit.

At times, the hearings may have been overproduced—too edited, too tightly scripted, too reliant on clips of video interviews rather than on live testimony from witnesses who might prove unpredictable. There have reportedly been internal disagreements about what the committee's final report, which will shape its legacy, should emphasize or omit. An additional point of tension has been the committee's reluctance to share the full transcripts of its interviews with the Department of Justice, despite months of requests—which Attorney General Merrick Garland reiterated last week. Thompson suggested, in response, that there would be transcripts released with the final report, before Christmas.

The D.O.J. wants the transcripts because it is doing its own steady, productive work in making sure that there are prosecutions in response to January 6th. Garland has named a special counsel, Jack Smith, to look into Trump's involvement in the assault, and also into his retention of classified and sensitive documents at Mar-a-Lago. Last week, five members of the Oath Keepers were convicted of various charges relating to the events at the Capitol, including obstructing an official proceeding and seditious conspiracy. A county prosecutor in Atlanta, who is investigating Trump's

pressuring of Georgia officials to “find” him votes, recently prevailed at the Supreme Court in her efforts to secure the testimony of Senator Lindsey Graham. The Court also let another House committee get six years of Trump’s tax returns. And the list of cases related to Trump’s business dealings is long.

Many of these investigations predated the January 6th committee and could, in the end, be more consequential. The committee will be missed, but it is not irreplaceable, and its demise is not the end of the accounting. There are too many people asking questions. ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

## Crossword

- The Crossword: Tuesday, November 29, 2022

**By Wyna Liu**

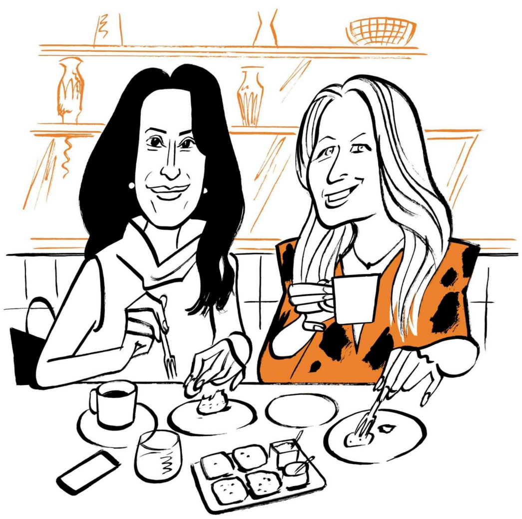
# Dept. of Perks


- [A Foot Soldier in the Credit-Card Wars]

# A Foot Soldier in the Credit-Card Wars

To keep up with an escalation in rewards perks, an American Express travel manager darts around the city to check for fingerprints on hotel light fixtures and judge which quail-egg-and-caviar blinis to recommend.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar]



"Don't leave home without it," ads for American Express used to advise. Then the options expanded. Chase Sapphire. Chase Sapphire Reserve. Venture Rewards, followed by more Ventures with more Rewards.

"We've been leading the travel space for over a hundred years," Antonia Olimpio, the New York manager of American Express's travel-services department said the other day. She wore a cream-colored blouse and matching pants. "Travel has changed. A two-hour delay? That's pretty common, nowadays," she said. "If you know that, in your back pocket, you've got somebody to call, that's where we come in and show our value."

Olimpio is one of nine regional experts charged with insuring that Amex's seven thousand travel consultants—the voices on the other end of the 1-800

number—know what's up. Hottest table in town? "That depends," Olimpio said. "Who's the card member? Someone that's really particular, or a little more laid-back? Super high-end, or sort of chill?" She continued, "I have a list that's broken down into all sorts of categories. Romantic, splashy seafood, young dancing, more mature dancing, uptown, downtown, girls' night."

Every week, Olimpio checks in on venues that are already in her recommendation engine, or are vying to be. Stop one: tea at the Baccarat Hotel. "So, some people are doing business," she said, surveying the second-floor salon, all high ceilings and gleaming glass. "Some people are just on their phones. It's calm. Quiet." She peered up at a light fixture, a chrome bar with glowing orbs. "No dust," she said. "No fingerprints. Flawless." She slid into a booth with Emily Vicker, a co-worker. "I try to do these visits with at least one other person," she said. "It ends up being a lot of food." Olimpio, who is thirty, used to work for a luxury life-style-management firm; her duties included some high-end dog walking.

"You mess that up, it's probably worse than forgetting to pick up their kid," Vicker said. Tea service arrived, followed by judgments. Blini with caviar and quail egg: "Insane," Olimpio said. Scones with clotted cream: "Incredible." The check was signed, an UberX ordered, an appraisal made: faultless. "But am I going to recommend this place for a family?" she mused. "Crystal and kids? Not a good combo."

Stop two: the Carlyle, which underwent a renovation during the pandemic. "You still have Diptyque in the bathrooms, right?" Olimpio asked Marina Poole, a sales manager who led a tour. "Or is it Le Labo?"

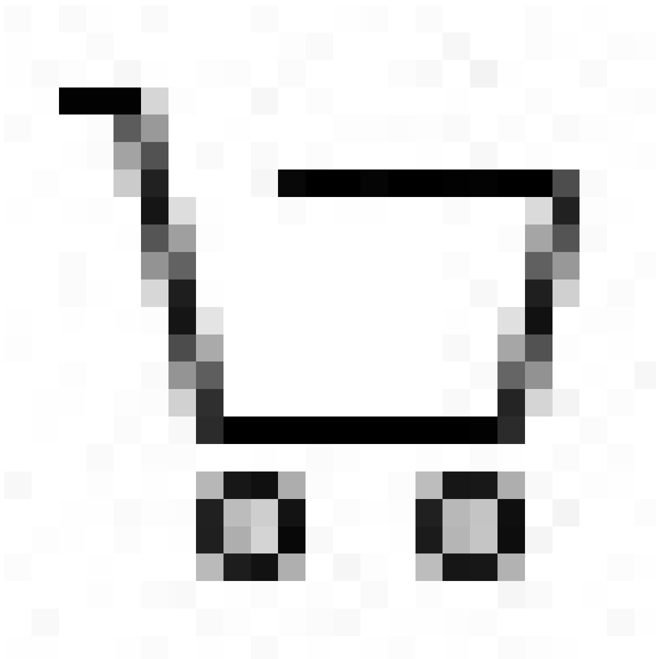


*"Always a still-life, never a portrait."*
*Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair*

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Shop



“We’ve been kind of struggling to get our normal supplier,” Poole said. “It’s Kiehl’s.” She showed them a twenty-sixth-floor suite that includes a baby grand piano and costs forty thousand dollars a night. “It was booked for the Met Gala and the U.N. General Assembly,” Poole remarked.

Over a “dirty dirty” Martini at Bemelmans, Olimpio said, “It’s good to see that they’ve kept the charm but updated the rooms.” She noted the USB ports on the nightstands. “When I travel, if there’s not an outlet right by my bed, I’m, like, ‘What the hell?’ ”

Stop three: Casa Cipriani, which sent its house car, a tangerine Aston Martin S.U.V., to ferry Olimpio and Vicker down to South Street.

“To be honest, it has no power,” the driver said. “I heard it’s meant for women.” Olimpio replied, “I will drag-race you any day.”

A tour of the maritime-themed hotel, private club, gym, and spa—cryotherapy chambers, logoed kettlebells—led to another table, and another sampling of high-carb specials. “We don’t have stemware,” Juliana Marchini, Casa Cipriani’s global sales director, said, of the Martini glasses. “When Harry’s Bar opened, in 1931, in Venice, there were no stems. It’s meant to make you feel like you’re on the Titanic or the S.S. Normandie, which actually sank in New York Harbor.”

Disaster-at-sea reference aside, Olimpio said, “This is for someone who’s just really about the exclusivity.” She twirled a forkful of tagliolini and mused about pastas past; in college, she’d studied in Rome. Asked if she had any Rome recommendations, she said, “Oh, yeah. But all the places I’m thinking of are pretty much holes in the wall.” ♦

**By Evan Osnos**

**By Patricia Marx**

**By Susan B. Glasser**

**By Stephania Taladrid**

# Fiction

- “A Sackful of Seeds”

# A Sackful of Seeds

By Salman Rushdie



The story of the city began in the fourteenth century of the Common Era, in the south of what we now call India or Bharat or Hindustan. The old king whose rolling head got everything going wasn't much of a monarch, just the type of ersatz ruler who crops up between the decline of one great kingdom and the rise of another. His name was Kampila, of the tiny principality of Kampili—Kampila Raya, *raya* being the regional version of *raja*, king. This second-rate *raya* had just enough time on his third-rate throne to build a fourth-rate fortress on the banks of the Pampa River, to put a fifth-rate temple inside it, and to carve a few grandiose inscriptions into the side of a rocky hill, before the army of the north came south to deal with him. The battle that followed was a one-sided affair, so unimportant that nobody bothered to give it a name. After the people from the north had routed Kampila Raya's forces and killed most of his army, they grabbed hold of the phony king and chopped off his crownless head. Then they filled it with straw and sent it north for the pleasure of the Delhi sultan. There was nothing particularly special about the battle without a name, or about the head. In those days, battles were commonplace affairs and severed heads

travelled across our great land all the time for the pleasure of this prince or that one. The sultan in his northern capital had built up quite a collection.

After the insignificant battle, surprisingly, there was an event of the kind that changes history. The story goes that the women of the tiny, defeated kingdom, most of them recently widowed as a result of the battle, left the fourth-rate fortress after making their final offerings at the fifth-rate temple, crossed the river in small boats, improbably defying the turbulence of the water, walked some distance to the west along the southern bank, and then lit a great bonfire and committed mass suicide in the flames. Gravely, without making any complaint, they said farewell to one another and walked forward without flinching. There were no screams when their flesh caught fire. They burned in silence; only the crackling of the fire itself could be heard.

Pampa Kampana saw it all happen. It was as if the universe itself were sending her a message, saying, Listen, breathe in, and learn. She was nine years old and stood watching with tears in her eyes, holding her dry-eyed mother's hand as tightly as she could, while all the women she knew entered the fire and sat or stood or lay at the heart of the conflagration, spouting flames from their ears and mouths: the old women who had seen everything and the young women just starting out in life and the girls who hated their fathers, the dead soldiers, and the wives who were ashamed of their husbands because they hadn't given up their lives on the battlefield and the women with the beautiful singing voices and the women with the frightening laughs and the women as skinny as sticks and the women as fat as melons. Into the fire they marched and the stench of their death made Pampa feel like retching, and then, to her horror, her own mother, Radha Kampana, gently freed her hand and very slowly but with absolute conviction walked forward to join the bonfire of the dead, without even saying goodbye.

For the rest of her life, Pampa Kampana, who shared a name with the river on whose banks all this happened, would carry the scent of her mother's burning flesh in her nostrils. The pyre was made of perfumed sandalwood, and an abundance of cloves, garlic, cumin seeds, sticks of cinnamon, and other spices had been added to it as if the burning women were being prepared as a gourmet dish to set before the sultan's victorious generals, but those fragrances—the turmeric, the big cardamoms, and the little

cardamoms, too—failed to mask the unique, cannibal pungency of women being cooked alive, and made the odor, if anything, even harder to bear. Pampa Kampana never ate meat again, and could not bring herself to remain in any kitchen in which it was being prepared. All meat dishes exuded the memory of her mother, and when other people ate dead animals she had to avert her gaze.

Pampa's father had died young, long before the nameless battle, so her mother was not one of the newly widowed. He had died so long ago that Pampa had no memory of his face. All she knew about him was what Radha Kampana had told her: that he had been a kind man, the well-loved potter of the town of Kampili, and that he had encouraged his wife to learn the potter's art as well, and after he died she took over his trade and proved to be more than his equal. Radha, in turn, had guided little Pampa's hands at the potter's wheel. The child was already a skilled thrower of pots and bowls and had learned an important lesson, which was that there was no such thing as men's work. Pampa Kampana had believed that this would be her life, making beautiful things with her mother, side by side at the wheel. But that dream was over now. Her mother had let go of her hand and abandoned her to her fate.

For a long moment, Pampa tried to convince herself that her mother was just being sociable and going along with the crowd, because she had always been a woman for whom the friendship of other women was of paramount importance. The girl told herself that the undulating wall of fire was a curtain behind which the ladies had gathered to gossip, and soon they would all walk out of the flames, unharmed, smelling a little of kitchen perfumes, perhaps, but that would pass soon enough. And then Pampa and her mother would go home.

Only when she saw the last shreds of roasted flesh fall away from Radha Kampana's head to reveal the naked skull did she understand that her childhood was over and from now on she must conduct herself as an adult and never commit her mother's last mistake. She would not sacrifice her body merely to follow dead men into the afterworld. She would refuse to die young and would live, instead, to be impossibly, defiantly old. Like the river, Pampa Kampana had been named for the deity Parvati—Pampa was one of the goddess's local names—and it was at this point that she received the

celestial blessing that would change everything, because this was the moment when the goddess's voice, as old as time, began to issue from her nine-year-old mouth.

It was an enormous voice, like the thunder of a high waterfall booming in a valley of sweet echoes. It possessed a music she had never heard before, a melody to which she later gave the name Kindness. Pampa Kampana was terrified, of course, but also reassured. This was not a possession by a demon. There was goodness in the voice, and majesty. Radha had once told her that two of the highest deities of the pantheon, Pampa and her lover, Shiva, the mighty Lord of the Dance himself, in his local, three-eyed incarnation, had spent the earliest days of their courtship near here, by the angry waters of the rushing river. Perhaps this was the queen of the gods herself, returning at a time of death to the place where her own love was born. With a feeling of serene detachment, Pampa, the human being, began to listen to the words of Pampa, the goddess, coming out of her mouth. She had no more control over them than a member of the audience has over the monologue of the star, and her career as a prophet and a miracle worker began.

Physically, she didn't feel any different. There were no unpleasant side effects. She didn't tremble, or feel faint, or experience a hot flush or a cold sweat. She didn't froth at the mouth or fall down in an epileptic fit, as she had been led to believe had happened to other people in such cases. If anything, there was a great calm surrounding her, like a soft cloak, reassuring her that the world was still a good place and things would turn out well.

"From blood and fire," the goddess said, "life and power will be born. In this exact place, a great city will rise, the wonder of the world, and its empire will last for more than two centuries. And you," the goddess said to Pampa Kampana, giving the young girl the unique experience of being personally addressed by a supernatural stranger speaking through her own mouth, "you will fight to make sure that no more women are ever burned in this fashion, and that men start considering women in new ways, and you will live just long enough to witness both your success and your failure." In this way Pampa Kampana learned that a deity's bounty was always a two-edged sword.

She began to walk without knowing where she was going. If she had lived in our time she might have said that the landscape looked like the surface of the moon: the pockmarked plains, the valleys of dirt, the rock piles, the emptiness, the sense of a melancholy void where burgeoning life should have been. But she had no sense of the moon as a place. To her, it was just a shining god in the sky. On and on she walked, until she began to see miracles. She saw a cobra using its hood to shield a pregnant frog from the heat of the sun. She saw a rabbit turn to face a dog that was hunting it, bite the dog's nose, and make it run away. These wonders made her feel that something marvellous was at hand. Soon after these visions, which were perhaps sent as signs by the gods, she arrived at the little *mutt* at Mandana.

A *mutt* could also be called a *peetham*, but to avoid confusion let us simply say that it was a monk's dwelling. Later, as the empire grew, the Mandana *mutt* became a grand place extending all the way to the banks of the rushing river, an enormous complex employing thousands of priests, servitors, tradesmen, craftsmen, janitors, elephant keepers, monkey handlers, stable hands, and workers in the *mutt's* extensive paddy fields, and it was revered as the sacred place where emperors came for advice, but in this early time before the beginning began it was humble, little more than an ascetic's cave and a vegetable patch, and the resident ascetic, still a young man at that time, a twenty-five-year-old scholar with long curly locks flowing down his back all the way to his waist, went by the name of Vidyasagar, which meant that there was a knowledge-ocean, a *vidya-sagara*, inside his large head. When he saw the girl approaching with hunger on her tongue and madness in her eyes, he understood at once that she had witnessed terrible things, and he gave her water to drink and what little food he had.

After that, at least in Vidyasagar's version of events, they lived together easily enough, sleeping on opposite sides of the cave, and they got along fine, in part because the monk had sworn a solemn vow of abstinence from the things of the flesh, so that even when Pampa Kampana blossomed into the grandeur of her beauty he never laid a finger on her, although the cave wasn't very big and they were alone in the dark. For the rest of his life, that was what he said to anyone who asked—and there were people who asked, because the world is a cynical and suspicious place and, being full of liars, thinks of everything as a lie. Which was what Vidyasagar's story was.

Pampa Kampana, when asked, did not reply. From an early age she acquired the ability to shut away from her consciousness many of the evils that life handed out. She had not yet understood or harnessed the power of the goddess within her, so she was not able to protect herself when the supposedly abstinent scholar crossed the invisible line between them and did what he did. He did not do it often, because scholarship usually left him too tired to satisfy his lusts, but he did it often enough, and every time he did she erased it from her memory by an act of will. She also erased her mother, whose self-sacrifice had sacrificed her daughter on the altar of the ascetic's desires, and for a long time she tried to tell herself that what had happened in the cave was an illusion, and that she had never had a mother at all.

In this way, she was able to accept her fate in silence, though an angry power began to grow in her, a force from which the future would be born. In time. All in good time.

She did not say a single word for the next nine years, which meant that Vidyasagar, who knew many things, didn't even know her name. He decided to call her Gangadevi, and she accepted the name without complaint, and helped him gather berries and roots to eat, to sweep out their poor residence, and to haul water from the well. Her silence suited him perfectly, because on most days he was lost in meditation, considering the meanings of the sacred texts that he had learned by heart, and seeking answers to two great questions: whether wisdom existed, or if there was only folly; and the related question of whether there was, among humans, such a thing as *vidya*, true knowledge, for which he was named, or if there were just many different kinds of ignorance, while true knowledge was possessed only by the gods. In addition, he thought about peace, and asked himself how to insure the triumph of nonviolence in a violent age.

This was how men were, Pampa Kampana thought. A man philosophized about peace but his deeds—his treatment of the helpless girl sleeping in his cave—were not in alignment with his philosophy.

When Pampa Kampana had been living in Vidyasagar's cave for nine years, two brothers came to call. They were cowherds from the hill town of Gooty who had gone to war, war being one of the growth industries of the time. They had joined up with a local princeling's army, and because they were

amateurs in the art of killing they had been captured by the Delhi sultan's forces and sent to the north, where to save their skins they pretended to be converted to the religion of their captors, and then escaped soon afterward, shedding their adopted faith like an unwanted shawl, getting away before they could be circumcised according to the requirements of the religion in which they didn't really believe. They were local boys, they explained, and they had heard of the wisdom of the sage Vidyasagar and, to be honest, they had also heard of the beauty of the mute young woman who lived with him, and so here they were in search of some good advice. They did not come empty-handed. They brought baskets of fresh fruit and a sack of nuts and an urn filled with milk from their favorite cow, and also a sack of seeds. Their names, they said, were Hukka and Bukka Sangama: Hukka, the tall, gray-haired, good-looking one, who stood very still and gazed deep into your eyes as if he could see your thoughts, and Bukka, his much younger sibling, the small rotund one who buzzed around him, and everyone else, like a bee. After their escape from the north, they were looking for a new direction in life. The care of cows had ceased to be enough for them, they said. Their horizons were wider now and their ambitions were greater, so they would appreciate any guidance, any ripples flowing from the amplitude of the Ocean of Knowledge, any whispers from the depths of wisdom that the sage might be willing to offer, anything at all that might show them the way. "We know of you as the great apostle of peace," Hukka Sangama said. "We're not so keen on soldiering ourselves, after our recent experiences. Show us the fruits that nonviolence can grow."

To everyone's surprise, it was not the monk but his eighteen-year-old companion who replied, in an ordinary, conversational voice, strong and low, a voice that gave no hint that it hadn't been used for nine years. It was a voice by which both brothers were instantly seduced. "Suppose you had a sackful of seeds," she said. "Then suppose you could plant them and grow a city, and grow its inhabitants, too, as if people were plants, budding and flowering in the spring, only to wither in the autumn. Suppose now that these seeds could grow generations, and bring forth a history, a new reality, an empire. Suppose they could make you kings, and your children, too, and your children's children."

"Sounds good," young Bukka, the more outspoken of the brothers, said. "But where are we supposed to find seeds like that? We are only cowherds,

but we know better than to believe in fairy tales."

"Your name Sangama is a sign," she said. "A *sangam* is a confluence, like the River Pampa, which is formed by the joining of the Tunga and Bhadra rivers, which were created from the sweat pouring down the two sides of the head of Lord Vishnu, and so it also means the flowing together of different parts to make a new kind of whole. This is your destiny. Go to the place of the women's sacrifice, the sacred place where my mother died, which is also the place where in ancient times Lord Ram and his brother Lakshman joined forces with the mighty Lord Hanuman of Kishkindha and went forth to battle the many-headed Ravana of Lanka, who had abducted the lady Sita. You two are brothers just as Ram and Lakshman were. Build your city there."

Now the sage spoke up. "It's not such a bad start, being cowherds," he said. "The sultanate of Golconda was started by shepherds, you know—in fact, its name means 'the shepherds' hill'—and those shepherds were lucky, because they discovered that the place was rich in diamonds, and now they are diamond princes, owners of the Twenty-three Mines, discoverers of most of the world's pink diamonds, and possessors of the Great Table Diamond, which they keep in the deepest dungeon of their mountaintop fortress, the most impregnable castle in the land, harder to take than even Mehrangarh, up in Jodhpur, or Udayagiri, right down the road."

"And your seeds are better than diamonds," the young woman said, handing back the sack that the brothers had brought with them.

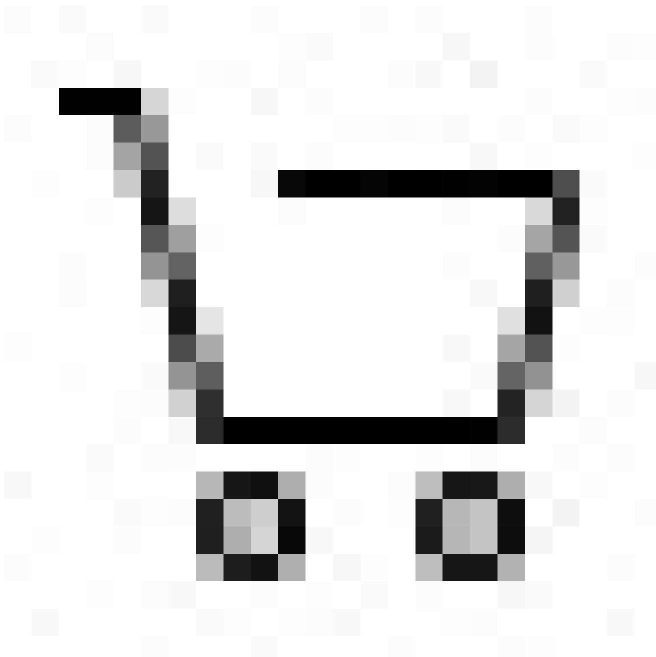


*"It sure doesn't feel like the Renaissance."*
*Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Phil Witte*

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“What, these seeds?” Bukka asked, very surprised. “But these are just an ordinary assortment we brought along as a gift for your vegetable patch—they are for okra, beans, and snake gourds, all mixed up together.”

The prophetess shook her head. “Not anymore,” she said. “Now these are the seeds of the future. Your city will grow from them.”

The two brothers realized at that moment that they were both truly, deeply, and forever in love with this strange beauty who was clearly a great sorceress, or at the very least a person touched by a god and granted exceptional powers. “They say Vidyasagar gave you the name of Gangadevi,” Hukka said. “But what is your real name? I would very much like to know it, so that I can remember you in the manner your parents intended.”

“Go and make your city,” she said. “Come back and ask me my name again when it has sprouted up out of rocks and dust. Maybe I’ll tell you then.”

After they had gone to the designated place and scattered the seeds, their hearts full of great perplexity and just a little hope, the two Sangama brothers climbed to the top of a hill of large boulders and thornbushes that tore at their peasant clothes and sat down in the late afternoon to wait and watch. No more than an hour later, they saw the air begin to shimmer, as it

does during the hottest hours of the hottest days, and then the miracle city started growing before their astonished eyes, the stone edifices of the central zone pushing up from the rocky ground, and the majesty of the royal palace, and the first great temple, too. All these and more arose in old-fashioned splendor, the Royal Enclosure spreading out at the far end of the long market street. The mud, wood, and cow-shit hovels of the common people also made their humble way into the air at the city's periphery. In those first moments the city was not yet fully alive. Spreading out from the shadow of the barren bouldered hills, it looked like a shining cosmopolis whose inhabitants had all abandoned it. The villas of the rich, with stone foundations from which sprouted graceful, pillared structures of brick and wood, stood unoccupied; the canopied market stalls were empty, awaiting the arrival of florists, butchers, tailors, wine merchants, and dentists; in the red-light district there were brothels but, as yet, no whores. The river rushed along and the banks where washerwomen and washermen would do their work seemed to wait expectantly for some action, some movement that would give meaning to the place. In the Royal Enclosure, the great Elephant House with its eleven arches anticipated the coming of the tuskers and their dung.

Then life began, and hundreds—no, thousands—of men and women were born full grown from the brown earth, shaking the dirt off their garments and thronging the city in the evening breeze. Stray dogs and bony cows walked in the streets, trees burst into blossom and leaf, and the sky swarmed with parrots, yes, and crows. There was laundry upon the riverbank, and royal elephants trumpeting in their mansion, and armed guards—women!—at the Royal Enclosure's gates. An army camp could be seen beyond the city's boundary, a substantial cantonment, in which stood an awesome force of thousands more newborn human beings, equipped with clattering armor and weapons, as well as with ranks of camels and horses, and siege weaponry—battering rams, trebuchets, and the like.

"This is what it must feel like to be a god," Bukka Sangama said to his brother in a trembling voice. "To perform the act of creation, a thing only the gods can do."

"We must become gods now," Hukka said, "to make sure the people worship us." He looked up into the sky. "There, you see," he pointed. "There is our

father, the Moon."

"No." Bukka shook his head. "We'll never get away with that."

"The great Moon God, our ancestor," Hukka said, making it up as he went along, "he had a son, whose name was Budha. And then after a number of generations the family line arrived at the Moon King of the mythological era. Pururavas. That was his name. He had two sons, Yadu and Turvasu. Some say there were five, but I think two is plenty. And we are the sons of the sons of Yadu. Thus we are a part of the illustrious Lunar Lineage, like the great warrior Arjuna in the Mahabharata, and even Lord Krishna himself."

"Let's go down and take a look at the palace," Bukka suggested. "I hope there are plenty of servants and cooks and not just a bunch of empty chambers of state. I hope there are beds as soft as clouds and maybe a women's wing of ready-made wives of unimaginable beauty as well. We should celebrate, right? We aren't cowherds anymore."

"But cows will remain important to us," Hukka proposed.

"Metaphorically, you mean?" Bukka asked. "I'm not planning to do any more milking."

"Yes," Hukka Sangama said. "Metaphorically, of course."

They were both silent for a while, awed by what they had brought into being. "If something can come out of nothing like this," Bukka finally said, "maybe anything is possible in this world, and we can really be great men, although we will need to have great thoughts as well, and we don't have any seeds for those."

Hukka was thinking along different lines. "If we can grow people like tapioca plants," he mused, "then it doesn't matter how many soldiers we lose in battle, because there will be plenty more where they came from, and therefore we will be invincible and will be able to conquer the world. These thousands are just a beginning. We will grow hundreds of thousands of

citizens, maybe a million, and a million soldiers as well. There are plenty of seeds left. We barely used half the sack."

Bukka was thinking about Pampa Kampana. "She talks a lot about peace, but if that's what she wants why did she grow us this army?" he wondered. "Is it peace she really wants, or revenge? For her mother's death, I mean."

"It's up to us now," Hukka told him. "An army can be a force for peace as well as for war."

"And another thing I'm wondering," Bukka said. "Those people down there, our new citizens—the men, I mean—do you think they are circumcised or not circumcised?"

Hukka pondered this question. "What do you want to do?" he asked finally. "Do you want to go down there and ask them all to open their *lungis*, pull down their pajamas, unwrap their sarongs? You think that's a good way to begin?"

"The truth is," Bukka replied, "I don't really care. It's probably a mixture, and so what."

"Exactly," Hukka said. "So what."

"So I don't care if you don't care," Bukka said.

"I don't care," Hukka replied.

"Then so what," Bukka confirmed.

They were silent again, staring down at the miracle, trying to accept its incomprehensibility, its beauty, its consequences. "We should go and introduce ourselves," Bukka said after a while. "They need to know who's in charge."

"There's no rush," Hukka replied. "I think we're both a little crazy right now, because we are in the middle of a great craziness, and we both need a minute to absorb it, and to get a grip on our sanity again. And in the second place . . ." And here he paused.

"Yes?" Bukka urged him on. "What's in the second place?"

"In the second place," Hukka said slowly, "we have to decide which one of the two of us is going to be king first, and who will be in the second place."

"Well," Bukka said, hopefully, "I'm the smartest."

"That's debatable," Hukka said. "However, I'm the oldest."

"And I'm the most likable."

"Again, debatable. But I repeat: I'm the oldest."

"Yes, you're old. But I'm the most dynamic."

"Dynamic isn't the same thing as regal," Hukka said. "And I'm still the oldest."

"You say that as if it's some sort of commandment," Bukka protested. "Oldest goes first. Where does it say that? Where's that written down?"

Hukka's hand moved to the hilt of his sword. "Here," he said.

A bird flew across the sun. The earth took a deep breath. The gods, if there were any gods, stopped doing what they were doing and paid attention.

Bukka gave in. "O.K., O.K.," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "You're my older brother and I love you and you go first."

"Thank you," Hukka said. "I love you, too."

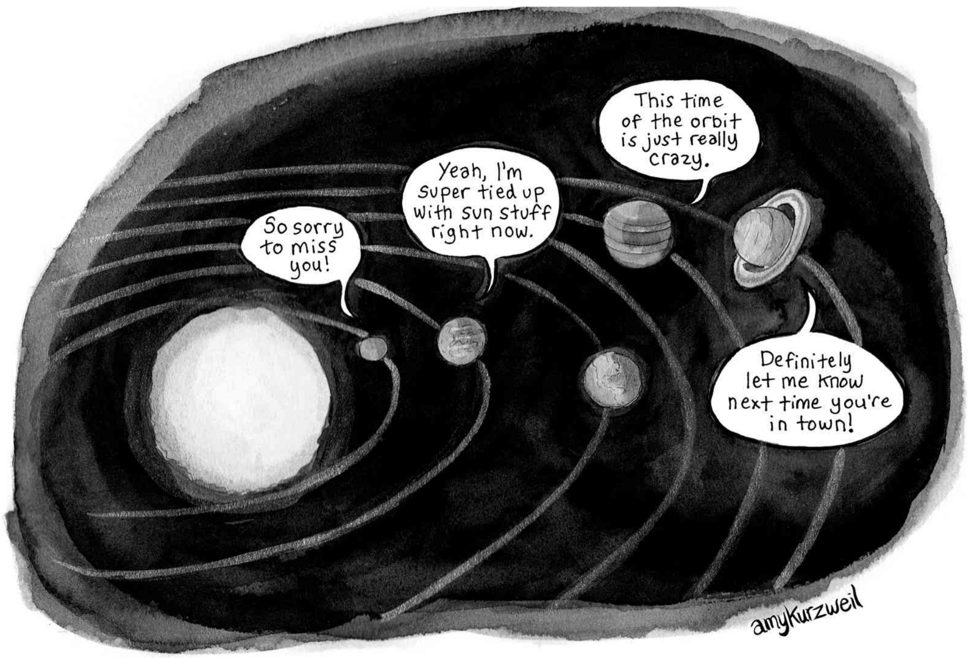
"But," Bukka added, "I get to decide the next thing."

"Agreed," Hukka Sangama, who was now King Hukka—Hukka Raya I—said. "You get first pick of bedrooms in the palace."

"And concubines," Bukka insisted.

"Yes, yes," Hukka Raya I said, waving an irritated hand. "And concubines as well."

After another moment's silence, Bukka attempted a great thought. "What is a human being?" he wondered. "I mean, what makes us what we are? Did we all start out as seeds? Are all our ancestors vegetables, if we go back far enough? Or did we grow out of fishes? Are we fishes who learned to breathe air? Or maybe we are cows who lost our udders and two of our legs? Somehow I'm finding the vegetable possibility the most upsetting. I don't want to discover that my great-grandfather was a brinjal, or a pea."




*Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil*

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“And yet it is from seeds that our subjects have been born,” Hukka said, shaking his head. “So the vegetable possibility is the most probable.”

“Things are simpler for vegetables,” Bukka mused. “They have their roots, so they know their place. They grow, and they serve their purpose by propagating and then being consumed. But we are rootless and we don’t want to be eaten. So how are we supposed to live? What is a human life? What’s a good life and what isn’t? Who and what are these thousands we have just brought into being?”

“The question of origins,” Hukka said gravely, “we must leave to the gods. The question we must answer is this one: now that we find ourselves here—and they, our seed people, are down there—how shall we live?”

“If we were philosophers,” Bukka said, “we could answer such questions philosophically. But we are poor cowherds only, who became unsuccessful soldiers, and have suddenly somehow risen above our station, so we had better just get down there and begin, and find out the answers by being there and seeing how things work out. An army is a question, and the answer to the question of the army is to fight. A cow is a question, too, and the answer to the question of the cow is to milk it. Down there is a city that appeared out of nowhere, and that’s a bigger question than we have ever been asked. And so maybe the answer to the question of the city is to live in it.”

But still, as if dazed, the two brothers remained on the hill, immobile, watching the movement of the new people in the streets of the new city below them, and often shaking their heads in disbelief. It was as if they were afraid of going down into those streets, afraid that the whole thing was some sort of hallucination, and that if they entered it the deception would be revealed, the vision would dissolve, and they would return to the previous nothingness of their lives. Perhaps their stunned condition explained why they did not notice that the people in the new streets, and in the army camp beyond, were behaving peculiarly, as if they, too, had been driven a little crazy by their incomprehension of their own sudden existence. There was a good deal of shouting and crying, and some of the people were rolling on the ground and kicking their legs in the air, punching the air as if to say, Where am I? Let me out of here. In the fruit-and-vegetable market people were throwing produce at one another, and it was unclear if they were playing or expressing their inarticulate rage. In fact, they seemed incapable of expressing what they truly wanted—food, or shelter, or someone to explain the world to them and make them feel safe in it, someone whose soft words

could grant them the happy illusion of understanding what they could not understand. The fights in the army camp, where the new people carried weapons, were more dangerous, and there were injuries.

The sun was already diving toward the horizon when Hukka and Bukka finally made their way down the rocky hill. As evening shadows crawled across the many enigmatic boulders that crowded their path, it seemed to them both that the stones were acquiring human faces, with hollow eyes that examined them closely, as if to ask, “What, are these unimpressive individuals the ones who brought a whole city to life?” Hukka, who was already putting on royal airs like a boy trying on the new birthday clothes his parents had left at the foot of his bed while he slept, chose to ignore the staring stones, but Bukka grew afraid, because the stones didn’t seem to be their friends, and could easily start an avalanche that would bury the two brothers forever, before they were able to step into their glorious future. The new city was surrounded by rocky hillsides of this sort, except along the riverbank, and all the boulders on all the hills now seemed to have become giant heads, whose faces wore hostile frowns, and whose mouths were on the verge of speech. They never spoke, but Bukka made a note. “We are surrounded by enemies,” he told himself, “and if we are not quick to defend ourselves against them they will thunder down upon us and crush us.” Aloud he said to his brother the king, “You know what this city doesn’t have, and needs as soon as possible? Walls. High, thick walls, strong enough to withstand any attack.”

Hukka nodded his assent. “Build them,” he said.

Then they entered the city and, as night fell, found themselves at the dawn of time, and in the midst of the chaos that is the first condition of all new universes. By now, many of their new progeny had fallen asleep, in the street, on the doorstep of the palace, in the shadow of the temple, everywhere. There was also a rank odor in the air, because hundreds of the citizens had fouled their garments. Those who were not asleep were like sleepwalkers, empty people with empty eyes, marching through the streets like automata, buying fruit at the fruit stalls without knowing what they were putting in their baskets, or selling the fruits without knowing what they were called, or, at the stalls offering religious paraphernalia, buying and selling enamel eyes, pink and white with black irises, selling and buying these and

many other trinkets to be used in the temple's daily devotions without knowing what deities liked to receive which offerings, or why. It was night now, but even in the darkness the sleepwalkers continued buying, selling, roaming the confused streets, and their glazed presences were even more alarming than those of the stinking sleepers.

The new king, Hukka, was dismayed at the condition of his subjects. "It looks like that witch has given us a kingdom of subhumans," he cried. "These people are as brainless as cows, and they don't even have udders to give us milk."

Bukka, the more imaginative of the two brothers, put a consoling hand on Hukka's shoulder. "Calm down," he said. "Even human babies take some time to emerge from their mothers and start breathing air. And when they emerge they have no idea what to do, and so they cry, they laugh, they piss and shit, and they wait for their parents to take care of everything. I think what's happening here is that our city is still in the process of being born, and all these people, including the grownups, are babies right now, and we just have to hope that they grow up fast, because we don't have mothers to care for them."

"And, if you're right, what are we supposed to do with this half-born crowd?" Hukka wanted to know.

"We wait," Bukka told him, having no better idea to offer. "This is the first lesson of your new kingship: patience. We must allow our new citizens—our new subjects—to become real, to grow into their newly created selves. Do they even know their names? Where do they think they came from? It's a problem. Maybe they will change quickly. Maybe by the morning they will have become men and women, and we can talk about everything. Until then, there's nothing to be done." The full moon burst out of the sky like a descending angel and bathed the new world in milky light. And on that moon-blessed night at the beginning of the beginning the Sangama brothers understood that the act of creation was only the first of many necessary acts, that even the powerful magic of the seeds could not provide everything that was needed. They themselves were exhausted, worn out by everything they had wrought, and so they made their way into the palace.

Here different rules seemed to apply. As they approached the arched gate into the first courtyard they saw a full complement of servitors standing before them like statues, equerries and grooms frozen beside their immobile horses, musicians on a stage leaning into their silent instruments, and any number of household servants and aides, dressed in such finery as was appropriate for those who served a king—cockaded turbans, brocaded coats, shoes that curled up at their pointed toes, necklaces, and rings. No sooner had Hukka and Bukka passed through the gate than the scene sprang to life, and all was bustle and hum. Courtiers rushed forward to escort them, and these were not the big babies of the city streets but grown men and women, well spoken and knowledgeable, and fully competent to carry out their duties. A flunky approached Hukka carrying a crown on a red velvet cushion, and Hukka set it happily on his head, noting that it was a perfect fit. He received the service of the palace staff as if it were his right and his due, but Bukka, walking a step or two behind him, had other thoughts. “Looks like even the magic seeds have one rule for the rulers and another for the ruled,” he reflected. “But if the ruled continue to be unruly it won’t be easy to rule them.”

The bedroom suites were so lavishly appointed that the question of who slept where was resolved without much discussion, and there were lords of the bedchamber to bring the brothers their nightgowns and show them the wardrobes filled with royal garments appropriate to their stature. But they were too tired to take in much about their new home, or to be interested in concubines, and within moments they were both fast asleep.

In the morning things were different.

“How is the city today?” Hukka asked the courtier who came into his bedroom to draw back the curtains. This individual turned and bowed deeply. “Perfect, as always, sire,” he replied. “The city thrives under Your Majesty’s rule, today and every day.”

Hukka and Bukka summoned horses and rode out to see the state of things for themselves. They were astonished to find a metropolis bustling about its business, thronged with adults behaving like grownups and children running around their feet as children should. It was as if everyone had lived here for years, as if the adults had been children there, and grown to adulthood, and

married, and raised children of their own; as if they possessed memories and histories, and belonged to a long-established community, a city of love and death, tears and laughter, loyalty and betrayal, and everything else that human nature contains, everything that, when added together, makes up the meaning of life—and all of it conjured up out of nothing by the magic seeds.

The noises of the city—street venders, horses' hooves, the clatter of carts, songs and arguments—filled the air. In the military cantonment, a formidable army stood at the ready, awaiting its lords' commands.

"How did this happen?" Hukka asked his brother in wonderment.

"There's your answer," Bukka said, pointing.

Coming toward them through the crowd, dressed in an ascetic's simple saffron wrap and carrying a wooden staff, was Pampa Kampana, with whom they were both in love. There was a fire blazing in her eyes.

"We built the city," Hukka said to her. "You said when we had done that we could ask you for your real name."

So Pampa Kampana told the brothers her name, and congratulated them. "You've done well," she said. "They just needed someone to whisper their dreams into their ears."

Everyone came from a seed, she added. Men planted seeds in women and so forth. But this was different. A whole city, people of all kinds and ages, blooming from the earth on the same day, such flowers have no souls, they don't know who they are, because the truth is they are nothing. But such truth is unacceptable. It was necessary, she said, to do something to cure the multitude of its unreality. Her solution was fiction. She was making up their lives, their castes, their faiths, how many brothers and sisters they had, and what childhood games they had played, and sending the stories whispering through the streets into the ears that needed to hear them. She was writing the grand narrative of the city, creating its story now that she had created its life. Some of her stories came from her memories of lost Kampili, the slaughtered fathers and the burned mothers; she was trying to bring that place back to life in this place, to bring back the old dead in the newly

living, but memory wasn't enough, there were too many lives to enliven, and so imagination had to take over from the point at which memory failed.

"My mother abandoned me," she said, "but I will be the mother of them all." ♦

*This is drawn from "Victory City."*

**By Rebecca Mead**

**By Stephania Taladrid**

**By Rachel Aviv**

**By Marion Renault**

## Letter from Michigan

- **An Anti-Abortion Activist's Quest to End the Rape Exception**

# An Anti-Abortion Activist's Quest to End the Rape Exception

For Rebecca Kiessling, helping mothers who've conceived children through sexual assault is part of a strategy for curtailing reproductive rights.

By Eren Orbey



As a young girl in suburban Michigan, in the nineteen-seventies, Rebecca Kiessling was teased for looking nothing like her adoptive parents. Larry and Gail Wasser were Jews who took the family to temple on the High Holidays, and Kiessling, a fair-haired, blue-eyed child, recalls people asking, "Who's the little shiksa?" Her only sibling, an adopted older brother, acted out in grade school and later got into trouble with the law. In Kiessling's memory, Larry would joke that "socially deviant behavior is genetic," a reference to the 1956 thriller "The Bad Seed," in which a psychopathic child turns out to be the descendant of a serial killer. Gail sewed matching mother-daughter outfits, but that did little to quell Kiessling's feeling that she didn't belong. She likes to recount a story about seeing the musical "Annie" and being transfixed by the song "Maybe," in which the orphan protagonist dreams of her mother and father. When Kiessling and I first met, last spring,

she recited some of the lyrics for me. “Betcha they’re good / Why shouldn’t they be?” Annie sings. “Their one mistake / Was giving up me.”

In a spiral-bound notebook, Kiessling counted down “the years, months, and days” until she would be old enough to legally access information about her biological parents. On her eighteenth birthday, in 1987, she contacted a local probate court. Soon she received a two-page letter from an adoption caseworker, which listed details about her birth mother down to her “reddish highlights” and “average” high-school grades but stated, “No information is available concerning your biological father, other than he was caucasian and of large build.” Kiessling recalled, “It sounded like a police description. I thought, Something’s wrong.” She reached out to the caseworker, who reluctantly confirmed what Kiessling already suspected: she was the product of a rape. She eventually spoke by phone with her birth mother—who asked that I use only her first name, Joann—and learned that Joann had been walking to a grocery store near her home in Livonia, Michigan, one night in October, 1968, when a stranger attacked her at knifepoint. Kiessling told me, “I remember thinking, Do I have this ugliness lurking inside of me? Because, after all, socially deviant behavior is genetic, right?”

Kiessling took some comfort in the reunion with her birth mother, writing in her journal, “She called me honey.” She saved a copy of a typewritten letter in which Joann told her, “*I AM SO HAPPY I AM CRYING*.” Years later, once the two had met in person, Joann confided that while pregnant with Kiessling she’d tried to get an abortion—twice—and backed out only because the procedure was illegal in Michigan. Pro-lifers sometimes dramatize the stakes of abortion by asking, “What if your mother had aborted *you*?” If you consider reproductive freedom to be a right, you might not be devastated by the prospect. “I was never mad at her,” an anonymous woman told the *Irish Times*, of her mother’s unsuccessful medication abortion, in an interview two years before the referendum that overturned Ireland’s abortion ban, in 2018. “It would have been much better for my mum’s mental and physical health.” For Kiessling, who says that she has always believed life starts at conception, Joann’s disclosure was essentially a confession of attempted murder. “My mom tried to kill me,” she said.

In the decades since, Kiessling has made a career as an attorney and a pro-life activist by leveraging her experience as a child of rape who narrowly

“survived” abortion. Her main targets are rape exceptions, the legal provisions that allow pregnant victims special access to the procedure. “I believe I am the living embodiment of what is at stake,” she has said. A graduate of Wayne State University Law School, Kiessling is fifty-three years old, with a lean build and a mane of strawberry-blond hair. For media appearances, she wears sleeveless dresses in bright jewel tones, which she has read play best on camera, and threads her pro-life arguments with calculated emotional appeals. During a CNN debate with the lawyer Gloria Allred, who has spoken about getting a back-alley abortion after being raped in the sixties, Kiessling offered condolences for the loss of Allred’s “son or daughter,” adding, “You may not think that their life matters, but you know what? That matters to me.” Kiessling’s story is featured in “The Gift of Life,” an anti-abortion documentary narrated by the former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee. Backstage at the film’s première, in 2011, she confronted Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry, then candidates for the Republican Presidential nomination, about their support for rape exceptions. Perry later said that Kiessling’s story “pierced my heart.” A day after the meeting, he signed a “personhood pledge,” vowing to protect human rights from the moment of conception, “without exception and without compromise.”

For a long time, many pro-lifers accepted that it was politically untenable to prohibit abortion in the so-called “hard cases” of rape and incest. Ronald Reagan was President when Kiessling found out how she was conceived, and she has recalled feeling “utterly disappointed” to learn that he supported rape exceptions, as have all Republican Presidents since. The Hyde Amendment, which has restricted federal funds for abortion since 1976, includes allowances for victims of rape and incest. Gallup polls have shown that three-quarters of Americans support legal abortion in such cases, but purists in the movement have never considered exceptions to be morally sound. Kristan Hawkins, the president of the nonprofit Students for Life of America, has decried such provisions for “determining another person’s value based on something other than his or her status as an innocent member of the human family.” On her Web site, Kiessling calls out two camps for “standing in judgment” of her life: pro-choicers who defend abortion “especially” in cases of rape, and pro-lifers who oppose it “except” in those cases.

In recent years, the Supreme Court's conservative majority has emboldened the pro-life movement to "ask for what it wants," as the pro-choice legal scholars Mary Ziegler and Michele Goodwin have written in *The Atlantic*. In June, the Court's ruling in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization overturned Roe v. Wade's federal protection for abortion without requiring state bans to include exceptions of any kind. To date, ten states have no rape exceptions. All ten include some provisions that protect the "life of the mother," though ambiguities about what qualifies as life-threatening have left many patients deprived of urgent medical care. When news broke, in July, that a ten-year-old rape victim in Ohio had been forced to leave the state for an abortion, some conservatives tried to dismiss the case as a hoax. (A twenty-seven-year-old man was later arrested on rape charges.) Others have denied that rape can even cause pregnancy, a right-wing canard rooted in the medieval belief that women had to experience pleasure in order to conceive.

Kiessling has pursued the same ends from a different angle, by devoting her legal career to advocating for mothers whose children were conceived through rape. Her work centers on the rare but nightmarish scenario in which a man who fathers a child through rape receives visitation rights or custody. A leader in this niche area of family law, she has represented or advised several dozen mothers facing custody battles with their alleged assailants. From a certain vantage, these efforts put her in the company of such feminist attorneys as Allred, who specialize in helping victims fight their abusers. For Kiessling, though, this line of work is first and foremost a strategy for combatting abortion. She told me, "If victims know they're going to be protected from their rapists, they're going to be more likely to choose life."

In 2017, Kiessling made headlines representing a Michigan mother named Tiffany Gordon, who'd become pregnant at the age of twelve when an older friend of a friend abducted and raped her. Gordon decided to go through with the pregnancy and gave birth to a son. Her assailant struck a plea deal and spent less than a year in county jail, though he later served prison time for sexually assaulting another girl. When Gordon's son was eight, she applied for public assistance, which, under federal law, triggers a routine effort to track down the father for child support. In most states, the authorities can skip this step if there is evidence of domestic abuse, but in

practice they often fail to do so. As a result, according to Lucy Guarnera, a forensic psychologist who studies rape-related pregnancies, seeking welfare can be like "poking the bear." In Gordon's case, a county judge ordered her to share custody with her rapist and to move within a hundred miles of his address. Kiessling, who took on the case pro bono, filed a motion to challenge the court's decision, drumming up media attention with a rally and a petition that collected more than a hundred thousand signatures. The judge reversed his ruling, claiming that he hadn't been made aware of the circumstances surrounding the child's birth.

The most frequently cited studies, based on decades-old population figures, suggest that about thirty thousand women in the United States become pregnant from rape every year, and about a third of them choose to raise the resulting babies. Until a decade ago, though, only about half of the states had passed any legislation limiting the parental rights of men who father children through rape. Today, most states have laws that apply only if the father has been convicted. But less than three per cent of rapes result in conviction, and the majority of pregnancies from rape are a product of intimate-partner abuse. In 2015, President Obama signed the Rape Survivor Child Custody Act, which incentivized states to allow courts to terminate a father's rights where there is "clear and convincing evidence" of rape, a lower burden of proof than "beyond a reasonable doubt." According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, less than half of the states have codified this standard, among them Michigan, where Kiessling worked to shape the bill. She told me, "It needs to be public policy that rapists don't make good parents."

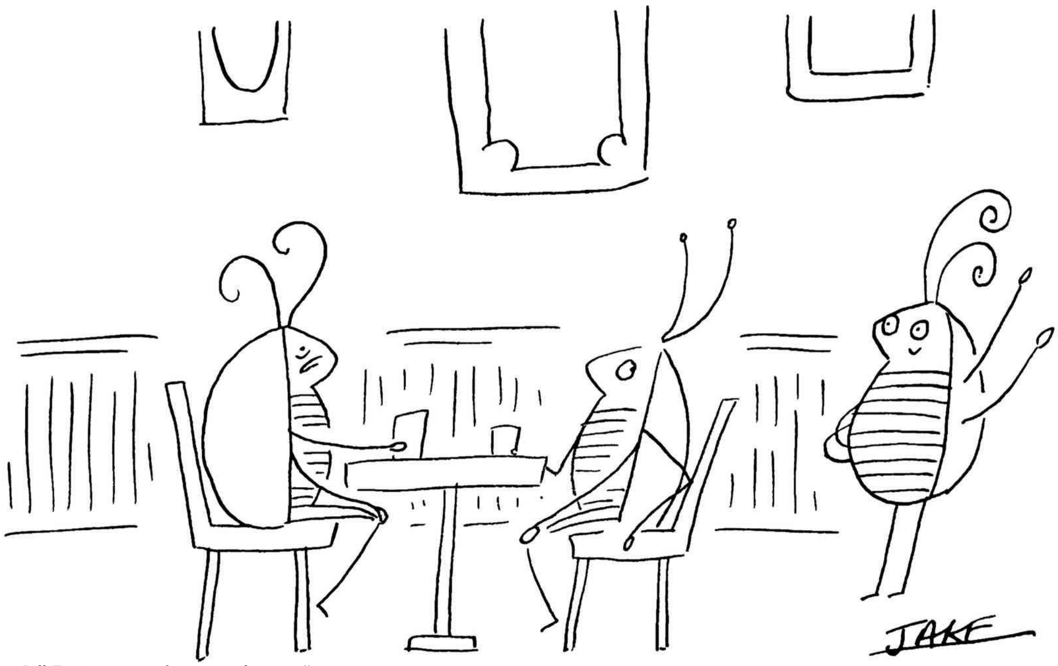
One week this past spring, I visited Kiessling at the Tudor-style home in the Detroit suburbs where she lives with her three teen-age daughters. (She and her ex-husband, a marketing manager, recently divorced.) Parked in the driveway was Kiessling's S.U.V., which bears pro-life bumper stickers and vanity plates referencing her advocacy organization, Save the 1—named for the estimated one per cent of abortions that involve pregnancies resulting from rape.

Inside the house, which is furnished in shades of off-white and glittering gray, Kiessling sat at her dining table with Genevieve Marnon, the legislative director of the nonprofit Right to Life Michigan. The women

were scheduled to speak that day at a conference for local crisis-pregnancy centers, the pro-life facilities that try to steer women away from abortion. In the meantime, they sipped herbal tea and puzzled over a flaw in the state's laws which one of Kiessling's clients was confronting. A young Michigan resident, the client had become pregnant after her employer allegedly raped her. She gave birth and left the baby at the hospital under the state's safe-haven law, which allows women to surrender their newborns anonymously. But soon after the baby was placed with an adoptive family the man (who denies the allegation) made use of a grace period during which birth parents can petition the court for custody. Kiessling and Marnon were now proposing changes to the existing legislation, so that a mother would have standing to challenge her rapist's parental rights even after giving up her own.

"It doesn't happen a lot, and you hate to make laws for those exceptions," Marnon said. But if Roe was overturned, she added, "I think this would come into play a lot more." A talkative woman in her fifties, Marnon told me that, among liberals especially, "there's this knee-jerk reaction, like, 'Well, of course you're gonna have an abortion. You shouldn't have to have a *rapist's baby*, right?' " Turning to Kiessling, she added, "No offense."

Kiessling waved her hand, as if to swat away the label. "I'm a grown woman and I still get called the 'rapist's child,' " she said. "The people who say that feel women who have the baby after rape are betraying the cause."

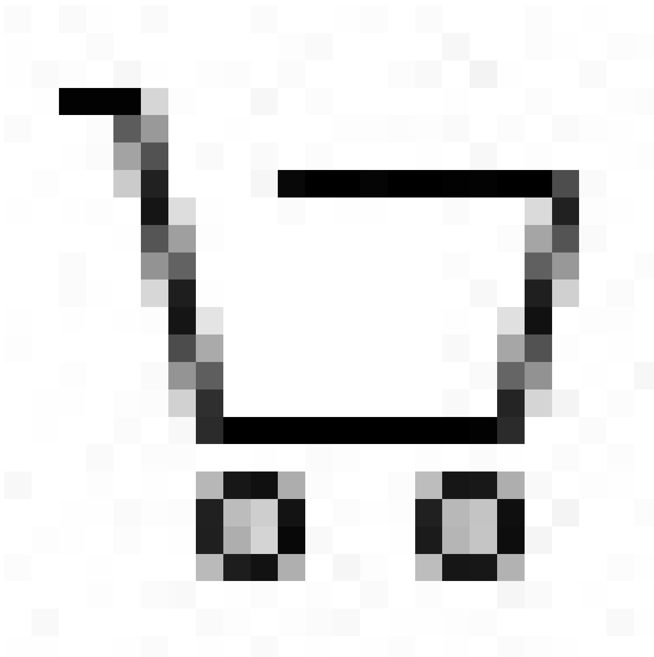



*"Sorry, Jeff. Two's company, three's an infestation."*
*Cartoon by Jake Goldwasser*

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Although pro-life leaders are among the loudest advocates for mothers who were raped, the movement to strengthen victims' parental rights has champions on both sides of the abortion debate. The Obama-era initiative was introduced by the Florida congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a pro-choice Democrat, and it received bipartisan support in the House and the Senate. Lisae Jordan, the executive director of the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, led a decade-long effort to enact the clear-and-convincing standard in her state. Although she is pro-choice, she collaborated with the Maryland Catholic Conference, an anti-abortion lobbying group, to get the bill passed. But Jordan told me that she objects to Kiessling's framing of victims' rights as an alternative to reproductive choice. "I'm concerned that the Right to Life folks do not spin these laws as some sort of savior for women who are raped," she said. "They're not going to replace abortion access by any stretch."

During the Supreme Court's oral argument in Dobbs, Justice Amy Coney Barrett downplayed concerns that abortion bans would force women into parenthood by asking whether safe-haven laws "take care of that problem." Kiessling speaks similarly about tweaking societal conditions to solve the problem of unwanted pregnancies. Part of a cohort of "pro-life feminists," she portrays abortion patients as misguided victims. During one conversation, she quoted the Eastern Orthodox activist Frederica Mathewes-

Green, who has written that a woman "wants an abortion as an animal, caught in a trap, wants to gnaw off its own leg." Kiessling added, "It's an act of desperation, and a sign that we, as a society, have failed her." She suggested a "multitude of solutions," including equipping student centers with high chairs and changing tables so that young mothers "don't have to choose college or abortion." I pointed out that, even in an imaginary American society that offered sufficient support to mothers, many women—and, perhaps especially, many pregnant rape victims—might still feel that they can't or don't want to have a baby. Kiessling cut me off. "As a feminist, I shudder to hear a man saying, 'Oh, women think they *can't*,' " she said sharply, adding, "What happened to 'I am woman, hear me roar'?"

In "Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity," the author Andrew Solomon writes that "many people see children of rape as intrinsically defective—including, often, their mothers." He quotes one survivor who described her son, in testimony before the Louisiana state legislature, as "a living, breathing torture mechanism that replayed in my mind over and over the rape." Lucy Guarnera, the expert on rape-related pregnancy, knew of no existing scholarly studies on the relationships between mothers from rape and their children. She told me that some women consider pregnancy "another trauma layered on top of the original trauma," but others don't, adding, "They don't necessarily fit neatly into categories that score your political points."

On Facebook, Kiessling runs private support groups both for mothers who've had children through rape and for children conceived in rape. She makes a point of keeping the two populations separate. "If there are some moms who say, 'I'm struggling today—my child got angry, and I felt like I could see the rapist in his face,' they need to have the freedom to say that," she said. The group for mothers has more than a hundred members, most of whom are pro-life. Kiessling told me that, in theory, she welcomes pro-choice members, but that she's seen pile-ons when mothers in the group express support for abortion. On the Web site of Save the 1, Kiessling features testimonials emphasizing the gift of motherhood even when it results from assault. "My sweet boy may have been conceived in rape, but he was carried with love," one entry, from a mother in Missouri, reads. Tyesha Ahmad, a thirty-four-year-old from Michigan, describes her child as "my beauty from ashes."

One morning at Kiessling's home, I met Ahmad, who belongs to the support group for mothers. A veteran of the Army Reserves, Ahmad alleges that she became pregnant, in 2014, after an ex-boyfriend—also her former unit commander—sexually assaulted her. She went through with the pregnancy and gave birth to a daughter in 2015. "When she was born, I didn't know what to think," Ahmad told me. "Because this is my child, but this is also my permanent connection to him." (Her ex maintains that all their sexual encounters were consensual.) After Ahmad applied for public assistance, a DNA test confirmed that her ex was the father and he was ordered to pay child support. Soon afterward, he went to court and won visitation rights. The judge assigned to the case hadn't yet heard the rape allegation, and Ahmad, who is Black, with a round, youthful face, felt that he treated her as a "bitter baby mama." Once, after she filed a motion requesting a list of modifications to her ex's parenting time, the judge called her a "very picky, picky, picky lady," adding that she and her ex were "stuck with each other for the next fifteen years, until this girl becomes eighteen." Ahmad contacted Kiessling after seeing a news segment about Tiffany Gordon. Kiessling wasn't available to represent Ahmad but recommended that she request a special hearing under Michigan's Rape Survivor Child Custody Act legislation.

Ahmad's romantic and professional history with her alleged abuser made the case especially thorny. At the hearing, which spanned two days last summer, her lawyer, Debra Kauten, presented testimony from a military investigator who'd looked into a previous rape allegation that Ahmad had made against her ex. The investigator had found probable cause that the assault occurred, but Ahmad had stopped coöperating with the probe, saying that she feared professional repercussions. Her ex's attorney tried to paint her as vindictive and inconsistent, pointing out that, on the day of the alleged attack that left her pregnant, she'd asked her ex for a ride home from the airport. Kauten noted that Ahmad had received a diagnosis of P.T.S.D. and was seeing three different therapists to cope with the mental toll of continued exposure to her alleged assailant. In the end, the judge found Ahmad to be the "more credible" witness. In December, 2021, he ruled that there was clear and convincing evidence of rape and revoked her ex's parental rights.

We sat on Kiessling's living-room couch, beneath decorative crosses emblazoned with the words "*hope*" and "*truth*," and joined a video call with

two other mothers from the Facebook support group. Both have young children who they say were conceived in rape, but neither has succeeded in challenging her alleged assailant's custody rights. One of the mothers wished to remain anonymous. The other, a California resident who asked to go by her middle name, Teresa, gave birth to fraternal twins after she was allegedly raped by a co-worker, in 2016, during a trip to Las Vegas. Her co-worker, who claims that the sex was consensual, now shares parenting time fifty-fifty. In California, terminating parental rights in cases of rape still requires a criminal conviction, but the Las Vegas detectives whom Teresa contacted told her that there was not "enough probable cause to move the case forward." A package that she'd sent to the police, containing a red dress that she believed was stained with her co-worker's semen, was returned unopened. During custody battles, complaints of domestic violence are often dismissed as mudslinging. After Teresa repeatedly tried to broach the rape during court proceedings, a judge chided her for conducting "burdensome litigation" and ordered her to pay almost five thousand dollars toward the father's legal fees.

Even in states that have adopted the clear-and-convincing standard, victims face long odds. Lisae Jordan, the pro-choice advocate who worked on Maryland's legislation, told me, "There are so many cases where you're never going to be able to prove the rape occurred in a court of law." Moreover, the laws usually stipulate that a court *may* terminate a father's rights if it's in the best interest of the child, not that it *must*. Lucy Guarnera described the legislation in most states as "very short" and "very vague," adding, "When you are successful, it tends to be random." To Kiessling's knowledge, Ahmad is the only mother since Tiffany Gordon who has succeeded in using Michigan's clear-and-convincing standard to deny her alleged rapist custody.

In an article published in the *Georgetown Law Journal*, in 2010, the pro-life attorney Shauna Prewitt blamed the weak protections on the abortion-rights movement and the medical establishment. Now an Assistant U.S. Attorney in San Diego, Prewitt conceived a daughter through an alleged rape in 2004, when she was a senior at the University of Chicago, and later fought the father for custody. In her view, pro-choice rhetoric positions abortion in cases of rape as "a matter of necessity rather than of choice," ignoring the needs of those who choose to keep their children.

The women on the support-group call echoed Prewitt's complaints. "The message should be 'Punish the rapist,' " Teresa said. "Not 'Abort! Abort! Abort! Or else you're going to have to share custody.' "

Kiessling replied, "They don't understand that so many of you felt like you had a little angel to help keep you company during your trauma." She described children of rape, somewhat paradoxically, both as sources of healing and as lingering proof of their fathers' crimes. "We do the hashtag all the time: #RapistsLoveAbortion, because it destroys the evidence," she said.

At the end of the call, Kiessling left the room and returned with a matching set of the placards that she often brings to pro-life protests. She told me that she finds signage plastered with grisly fetal imagery too painful to bear. Her own signs are hot pink or baby blue, and decorated with illustrations of dainty infant feet. She passed one to Ahmad. "*MOTHER FROM RAPE*," it read in block letters. "*I LOVE MY CHILD*." The second sign, which Kiessling usually carries herself, was a gift for Ahmad's daughter: "*CONCEIVED IN RAPE—I LOVE MY LIFE*."

Last March, Kiessling travelled to Wyoming to testify in favor of a proposed state abortion ban with no exceptions for rape or incest. "This trigger bill here is perfect," she told a committee of lawmakers, speaking from behind a long, polished table at the state capitol, in Cheyenne. As she often does, Kiessling cited the philosophy of fetal personhood and quoted the Fourteenth Amendment's equal-protection clause, telling the legislators, "Exceptions are discriminatory." But the rest of her testimony was a raw personal plea. "When you deny equal protection," she said, her voice breaking, "you're saying to someone like me, 'I think your mother should have been able to abort you. If I had my way, you'd be dead right now.' " At one point, she appealed to the committee's chairman, a Republican state senator who she'd learned was a volunteer fireman. Would he refuse to save young burn victims just because they'd be "a horrible reminder to their parents"?

Kiessling had testified at the invitation of the bill's sponsor, a state representative named Rachel Rodriguez-Williams, who runs a crisis-pregnancy center in Cody, Wyoming. Their abortion ban passed handily in

Wyoming's state senate, but, in a final review of the bill, a pro-choice Republican had proposed adding exceptions for the "very egregious circumstances" of rape and incest. The amendment squeaked by, fifteen to fourteen, after one pro-life state senator was excused from the vote. Among the ayes was the volunteer fireman, who was apparently unswayed by Kiessling's direct entreaty.

The following week, Rodriguez-Williams scheduled a video call with Kiessling to plan their next moves. Wyoming state law doesn't yet observe the clear-and-convincing standard, and Rodriguez-Williams wanted Kiessling's advice. Kiessling explained that, even with a criminal conviction, the existing law merely permits judges to terminate a rapist's parental rights. There was no guarantee.

"That's not O.K.," Rodriguez-Williams said, scribbling notes.

Kiessling, who was seated at her dining table, offered to testify again when a new bill was ready. "I know you have a lot of men in your legislature who think that this just doesn't happen," she said.

Talk turned to the trigger bill, and Kiessling explained that she'd challenged established rape exceptions before. "What I need is local counsel," she said. In 2018, when the A.C.L.U. of Iowa sued the state to block a new "heartbeat" law, she intervened in the lawsuit, filing a motion to remove the exceptions. "It's like putting a target right upon us," she said at the time. The judge denied her request, calling it "heartfelt" but "lacking as grounds for intervention." Still, Kiessling told Rodriguez-Williams that a similar maneuver could be worth trying in Wyoming. "Otherwise, everybody's just gonna say rape," she said. "It's like a secret passcode."

As a law student at Wayne State, in the early nineties, Kiessling converted to Catholicism and wrote a forty-three-page "Philosophical Abortion Essay." The paper, now posted on her Web site with a note warning students not to plagiarize, concludes, "It is an indisputable fact that an unborn child is a living human being since no human 'fetus' has ever been known to develop into a dolphin, a rabbit, or a carrot." At twenty-six, Kiessling started her own family-law practice in Oakland County, Michigan, and devised creative tactics to protect "preborn children" in the community. She argued that a

divorcing woman had the right to keep frozen embryos that her ex wanted destroyed (a judge disagreed), and offered free representation to pregnant clients who promised to keep their babies. In the summer of 1998, she read a news story about a seventeen-year-old in Alabama who'd sought a court's permission to get an abortion without parental consent. The court had granted her request, but only after appointing a guardian ad litem to represent the interests of the fetus.

Kiessling was inspired by that case when she learned, soon afterward, of a twelve-year-old Michigan girl who'd been impregnated by her older brother. By the time the girl's parents discovered the pregnancy, she was twenty-seven weeks along, past the cutoff for a legal abortion in the state. Instead, they made an appointment with George Tiller, a doctor in Wichita, Kansas, who specialized in late terminations. (A decade later, he was murdered by an anti-abortion extremist.) Before the family could go to the appointment, however, a judge blocked the girl from leaving the state, and prosecutors petitioned to investigate her parents for neglect. The case became a flash point for local pro-lifers, some of whom offered to foot the bill for an early delivery or to adopt the baby themselves. Kiessling, then working under her maiden name, Rebecca Wasser, filed a motion to appoint herself guardian ad litem of the fetus and said she'd found a doctor who was willing to deliver the baby that day, two months premature. Lauren Tomayko, a lawyer for the girl's parents, told me, "She was a zealot. There's no other way to put it." The judge refused to consider Kiessling's motion and cleared the way for the abortion to proceed.

Kiessling often cites the work of David C. Reardon, a pro-life author known for touting the unproved malady of "post-abortion syndrome." In his 1996 book, "Making Abortion Rare," he wrote, "We must change the abortion debate so that we are arguing with our opponents on their own turf, the issue of defending the interests of women." Like Reardon, who has described abortion as a "painful intrusion into a woman's sexual organs by a masked stranger," Kiessling casts the procedure as a form of brutality. She told me, of the twelve-year-old girl, "More violence in the place where she was violated isn't going to help her heal." I asked Kiessling whether she might also have been acting out of a sense of identification with the girl's fetus, or a primal feeling of rejection stemming from her own mother's abortion attempts. Kiessling wasn't surprised by the suggestion. "I've seen it over the

years: 'All she cares about is her—like the world wouldn't revolve without her in it,' " she told me. "The most selfish thing to do would be to say, 'Oh, at least *my* life was spared. Too bad for the rest.' "

Before Kiessling gave birth to her biological daughters, whom she has referred to as "second-generation abortion survivors," she felt called to adoption, which she sees as another way of standing up for stigmatized children. She adopted three children, all of whom had tragically short lives. Her sons, a pair of biological half brothers named Caleb and Kyler, died of fentanyl poisoning in 2020, after taking pills from the same tainted batch. When Kiessling gives speeches, she often invokes their names alongside that of her late daughter, Cassie, whom she adopted at birth, in 2000. She'd met the biological mother at a crisis-pregnancy center, and according to Kiessling an amniocentesis had been normal. But Cassie was born with the genetic disorder DiGeorge syndrome and died after thirty-three days.

In a ninety-minute autobiographical film from 2008, "Conceived in Rape: From Worthless to Priceless," Kiessling recounts Cassie's story from an empty nursery, with a pastel-colored Teddy bear clasped to her stomach. She recalls that, when she first researched her daughter's condition, "all I kept finding was how you could detect it in utero so that you could have the opportunity to abort." Cassie had severe physical anomalies, including a hole in her heart, and went into cardiac arrest after leaving the *NICU*. Kiessling often describes fighting to keep resuscitating the baby against doctors' advice, even after she'd suffered extensive brain damage. In the film, Kiessling speaks with a chilling sense of certainty that this was the moral course of action. She does a disdainful impression of a doctor telling her, "You have to consider what her 'quality of life' would be." Kiessling recalls responding, "I don't care. We'll take care of her."

One afternoon in early June, I spoke over Zoom with Kiessling and Joann, her biological mother, who is eighty-four and lives near Detroit. They were sitting outside Joann's house in the shade of a yellow umbrella. In the years after her reunion with Joann, Kiessling distanced herself from her adoptive parents. Larry Wasser, whom I reached by phone, recalled that "things started to unravel" when he and Kiessling discussed abortion. "It led to her throwing me out of her house one time because I was talking about women's rights, and she said, 'You want me killed? You want me dead?' " In 2010,

Kiessling had a judge issue Larry and Gail notices terminating their parental rights. (Gail has since died.) Joann and her current husband adopted Kiessling soon afterward. To celebrate, Kiessling threw herself a “baby shower,” with pink balloons and a cake frosted with the message “It’s a girl.”



*“I think you just folded the cat.”*
*Cartoon by Mick Stevens*

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For a long time, Kiessling hoped to track down her birth father, a prospect that alarmed Joann. “I don’t know why she’d really want to do that,” Joann told me. A decade ago, Kiessling saw a television special about John Norman Collins, a.k.a. the Ypsilanti Ripper, who is believed to have raped and murdered a number of young women in southeastern Michigan in the late sixties. She says that she persuaded an attorney to have Collins take a DNA test in prison, where he’s serving a life sentence for one of the killings, but that it wasn’t a match. Later, after sending a saliva sample to Ancestry.com, Kiessling connected with a half brother, who she says described their father as abusive and advised her to attempt a meeting only if she was in public and accompanied by a man. Kiessling decided against it. “One day, when he dies, I will look in his casket, and that will be my closure,” she told Joann. (Kiessling’s half brother did not respond to requests for comment. Her father, reached by phone, hung up at the mention of her name.)

Joann, a petite woman with cropped white hair, recalls very little about the man who attacked her. She’d been walking to the store to buy milk. It was about ten o’clock. The Tigers had just won the World Series, and ribbons of

toilet paper still hung from the trees. “He cut my slacks I had on,” Joann told me. “He didn’t say much of anything. He said, ‘Behave yourself.’ ” The next morning, she burned her clothes. She was in the midst of divorcing her first husband, with whom she had a son and a daughter. “I didn’t know how I was going to support them, let alone another one,” she said.

At the time, abortion was illegal in Michigan, with no exceptions for rape or incest, under a state law dating to 1931. A friend of Joann’s sister had got an underground abortion at an ob-gyn’s office in Detroit, so Joann went there. “There was dried blood on the counter,” she recalled. The doctor told her that she was too far along, but he referred her to another provider, who issued strict instructions. Joann was to wait, alone, in front of a statue of “The Thinker” downtown. Then someone would drive her, blindfolded, to an undisclosed location. “I had to have a sanitary napkin and a belt with me, and eight hundred dollars,” she said. The night before the procedure, she backed out. “All I could think was it wouldn’t go right, and somebody would find me in a ditch somewhere, and my ex-husband would get my two children.” She gave birth on July 22, 1969, and drove the newborn Kiessling to a foster home.

Joann has mostly avoided participating in her daughter’s media engagements. “I don’t want nobody coming after me,” she said. But Kiessling has recounted her mother’s story often, emphasizing that, like Norma McCorvey, the plaintiff in Roe v. Wade, Joann eventually had a pro-life awakening. In 2019, testifying in favor of Ohio’s heartbeat law, Kiessling told legislators, “Today, my birth mother and I are both thankful we were both protected by law from the horror of abortion.”

When I asked Joann about her views on abortion, though, she sounded conflicted. “It’d probably be the best thing to do away with it, you know, altogether,” she said. She paused, then added, “I suppose, in certain cases, they’d probably still be able to do it.”

“Like ‘life of the mother’?” Kiessling asked.

“Yeah, like ‘life of the mother.’ I’ve changed my mind along the way because I don’t think abortion should be used as birth control. But there was one article where the baby was all deformed and had a bad heart. . . . ” Joann

trailed off. “And some woman in that kind of case should have the right, because otherwise—”

“I disagree with you on that,” Kiessling said with a pinched smile. “Think about baby Cassie. You were just talking about her earlier, how beautiful she was.”

“She was, but she suffered,” Joann replied.

“She didn’t suffer,” Kiessling said. “She was loved.” Kiessling shook her head and looked away. She seemed wounded, as though Joann’s ambivalence about abortion called into question her maternal love. When I asked Joann what she made of rape exceptions, she answered without hesitation: “No, I don’t think for rape anymore, because Rebecca turned out to be a special person.”

Kiessling and I were talking by phone on the morning of June 24th, when I noticed a news alert announcing the Supreme Court’s ruling in Dobbs. She had been planning to spend the weekend at a pro-life conference in Indiana, and she gasped when I told her of the decision: “Oh, my gosh!” she said. “We’re gonna have the best celebration.” Later that day, she spoke at an impromptu rally of anti-abortion activists outside the Michigan Hall of Justice, in Lansing. She was carrying one of her signs and wore a dress in a matching shade of pink. Gesturing toward her high heels, which were bedazzled with the words “*BAM!*” and “*POW*!,” she told the crowd, “You’re superheroes—you save lives.”

But Kiessling went on to call the victory “bittersweet.” Once Roe was overturned, pro-lifers in Michigan had hoped to see prosecutors enforce the old abortion ban. “I *literally* owe my birth to that 1931 law,” Kiessling said. In anticipation of Dobbs, though, Planned Parenthood of Michigan had sued to block the law’s enforcement, resulting in a temporary injunction.

A record number of states placed abortion measures on the ballot this year. In the first referendum of its kind since Dobbs, in August, Kansans overwhelmingly rejected a pro-life amendment to the state’s constitution. In Michigan, the Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, who was running for a second term, urged voters in the midterms to support Proposal 3, a

measure to enshrine freedoms in the state's constitution, including "all decisions about pregnancy." Kiessling spent the fall touring Michigan to mobilize the opposition, giving speeches at prayer rallies and, outside one Detroit church, at a graveside vigil for what a tombstone called "unborn babies murdered in the holocaust of abortion." But, as in every state facing ballot measures, voters in Michigan chose to protect access to the procedure. Whitmer won reëlection, and Proposal 3 passed by a comfortable margin. Democrats also flipped both chambers of the state legislature, giving the Party complete control for the first time since 1983.

The day after the elections, Kiessling wrote on Facebook that Michigan was set to become "as bad as New York and California," adding, "It's going to be very dark, very evil, very ugly." For Kiessling, though, the success of Dobbs and the setback of the midterms are two wayposts in a struggle that will stretch on for as long as it needs to. "Child sacrifice was going on since the days of antiquity," she told me. "There's *always* been a battle for life. It's gone on for thousands of years, and I think it's never gonna end." She spoke hopefully of a future, a few decades from now, when infants who have yet to be conceived will come of age to discover that post-Dobbs abortion bans protected them, just as the Michigan law protected her. Their mothers may not have wanted to give birth, but they will love their babies in the end. "I think it'll be hard to deny this whole generation of children who will be born," Kiessling said. She added, "You can't deny a person's life. Their story." ♦

**By Jane Mayer**

**By Jia Tolentino**

**By Corey Robin**

**By Jeannie Suk Gersen**

## Musical Events

- [Counting Down "The Hours" at the Met]

# Counting Down “The Hours” at the Met

Kevin Puts’s new opera, inspired by Michael Cunningham’s novel, is finely crafted but lacks an original voice.

By [Alex Ross]



Kevin Puts’s “The Hours,” which had its première last month at the Metropolitan Opera, begins with a prologue marked “Dreamily, from the depths.” Woodwinds skitter about and trill; harps glissando mysteriously; strings sustain a distant dissonant chord; brass emit softly clashing tones. Over this wash of sound, the chorus sings fragmentary phrases that coalesce into a familiar sentence: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” This, we are meant to think, is the creative subconscious of Virginia Woolf as she works on “Mrs. Dalloway,” her most famous novel, in 1923. Later, we see Woolf struggling to recall that opening line, which came to her as she was waking up. Her husband, Leonard, tells her, “You’ll find it again.”

“The Hours” is based on Michael Cunningham’s novel, which appeared in 1998, and on Stephen Daldry’s film adaptation of the book, which was

released in 2002. All three works feature Woolf as a central character and emulate the themes of “Mrs. Dalloway.” Three stories are intertwined: that of Clarissa, a book editor who is leading a Dalloway-like life in modern New York; that of Laura, a postwar Los Angeles housewife who is reading “Mrs. Dalloway” and battling depression; and that of Woolf herself, writing through inner crisis.

Dramatizing the creative process of a major artist always risks bathos. I enjoy cringing at the memory of the Paris-in-the-twenties film “The Moderns,” in which Hemingway mutters to himself, “Paris is a *bon repas*, a travelling picnic. . . . Paris is a portable banquet.” The sentence-hunting exercise in the various iterations of “The Hours” isn’t as risible as that, but it still has the odor of cliché. Furthermore, it’s at odds with the textual history of the novel. An earlier version of the line, in a story published in 1923, was “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the gloves herself.” Woolf inserted the flowers at a later stage. But revision doesn’t lend itself to romanticization.

Bio-pic tropes aside, “The Hours” is a finely crafted, smartly paced opera, one that maintains and even deepens the intricate narrative structure it inherits from the novel and the film. The libretto is by Greg Pierce, who in 2016 collaborated with the composer Gregory Spears on “Fellow Travelers,” a haunting tale of gay life during the Cold War. Pierce is expert at engineering deft transitions and at condensing personalities into terse lines. For “The Hours,” he has designed duets and trios in which the three main characters commune with one another across time, their psychologies and preoccupations overlapping. The première production, directed by Phelim McDermott, capitalizes on that chronological blur, with rapidly shifting backdrops and scurrying squads of choristers, dancers, and supernumeraries.

What the opera lacks, however, is a compositional identity distinct enough to hold its own against the jumpy genius of Woolf’s prose—or, for that matter, against the indelible musical signature of Philip Glass, who scored the film. Puts takes cues from the American neo-Romantic tradition, particularly the lush nostalgia of Samuel Barber. He fashions sumptuous orchestrations and writes singable, soaring vocal lines. But he does not generate memorable melodies, and he leans too often on sombrely swelling textures, which bring to mind the consolatory end-credits music for a Hollywood war epic. In the prologue, he tries for something more experimental, echoing Kaija Saariaho

and John Adams. The net effect is glib and insubstantial—sleek professionalism in place of raw imagination.

“The Hours” is still worth seeing for its formidable cast—above all, for Joyce DiDonato. The increasingly incomparable mezzo-soprano delivers an astonishing physical impersonation of Woolf, her body language hunched, flinching, but determined; several times, I had to remind myself who was onstage. DiDonato was last seen at the Met in the glittering, devious title role of Handel’s “Agrippina.” In “The Hours,” she adopts a drastically different vocal persona, unleashing foghorn tones in her lower range and searchlight timbres up top. Most important, she finds passion and wit in a character who, in Nicole Kidman’s portrayal, came across as relentlessly dour.

Renée Fleming, absent from the Met since 2017, returns with her celebrated high notes remarkably well preserved. If, on opening night, she struggled to make herself heard in the middle and lower registers, she nonetheless delineated her role sharply. Kelli O’Hara, as Laura, showed off the crisp diction and pointed phrasing one expects of a Broadway veteran. Among a host of gifted supporting singers, Kyle Ketelsen stood out for his wrenching turn as Richard, a poet-novelist in the grip of *aids* dementia. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, in the pit, luxuriated in Puts’s orchestral colors without overwhelming the singers. Given that “The Hours” pays tribute to an august feminist writer, the maleness of the lead creative team was conspicuous: the choreographer Annie-B Parson was the only woman in the group.

Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels’s “Omar,” an operatic meditation on suffering and spirituality in nineteenth-century Black America, had its première at the Spoleto Festival this past spring and played at L.A. Opera in October and November. It’s part of a welcome wave of Black opera at leading American companies; last season, Terence Blanchard’s “Fire Shut Up in My Bones” triumphed at the Met and Anthony Davis’s “X” had a notable revival at Detroit Opera. Giddens, who composed “Omar” with Abels, also belongs to a growing cohort of American women taking possession of contemporary opera. “Omar” can be named alongside Du Yun’s “In Our Daughter’s Eyes,” another L.A. Opera presentation, and Missy Mazzoli’s “The Listeners,” accessible on streaming video from the Norwegian Opera, as one of the year’s strongest music-theatre scores.

The libretto of “Omar,” fashioned by Giddens, is based on the life of Omar ibn Said, a West African Muslim scholar who was enslaved and brought to South Carolina in 1807, and who later wrote a memoir, in Arabic. The opera recounts the terrors of the Middle Passage, Omar’s ordeal under a sadistic plantation owner, his escape and recapture, and his subsequent life in a less inhumane environment. A somewhat thinly sketched group of characters surrounds the protagonist; the strength of the conception lies less in its narrative energy than in its ritual atmosphere.

The composers thrive on the intersection of traditions. Giddens, a North Carolina native, is a singular presence in American culture: an Oberlin-trained opera singer who has turned to the cultivation of banjo and fiddle music, with an emphasis on its Black roots. Abels has made his name in concert music, choral music, and film scoring, winning notice especially for his chameleonic contributions to Jordan Peele’s “Get Out,” “Us,” and “Nope.” Giddens insures a freshness of melodic invention and rhythmic play; Abels is as virtuosic an orchestrator as Puts. Spirituals, hymns, Islamic cantillation, West African drumming, square dancing, Italianate lyricism, and Wagnerian grandeur coexist in uneasy vitality, showing both the promise and the limitations of music as a medium of cross-cultural understanding.

Kaneza Schaal directed the show with a keen sense of ceremonial movement. The sets, by Christopher Myers, made mesmerizing use of textual motifs, in Arabic and English. Jamez McCorkle delivered a grittily noble performance as Omar, his tenor focussed in pitch and rugged in timbre. Amanda Lynn Bottoms lent weight to the formulaic role of Omar’s sorrowing mother; Jacqueline Echols, as an enslaved woman named Julie, sang with a room-filling radiance of tone that promises a major career. Kazem Abdullah elicited vibrant sounds from the L.A. Opera orchestra and chorus. In the final scene, soloists and choristers left the stage and took positions all around the auditorium, singing a meticulously layered, hypnotically incantatory hymn in praise of Allah. This was the second time this year that I had heard such an anthem in the opera house; the first was Malcolm X’s pilgrimage to Mecca in “X.” In both cases, the shiver of exaltation stayed with me for a long while. ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

## Night Life


- **Pierre Kwenders Summons an International Midnight**

# Pierre Kwenders Summons an International Midnight

The singer, whose beats call upon both Congolese sounds and electro-pop, plays his first New York show since the release of his album “José Louis and the Paradox of Love.”



As a teen-ager, **Pierre Kwenders** emigrated from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Montreal, and the music that the singer cooks up as an adult evokes both locales, with lyrics in a quintet of languages and beats that call upon both Congolese sounds and electro-pop. His every song summons an international midnight. At Nublu 151, on Dec. 8, Kwenders plays his first New York show since winning Canada’s Polaris Music Prize, for “José Louis and the Paradox of Love,” a handsome LP released earlier this year.

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

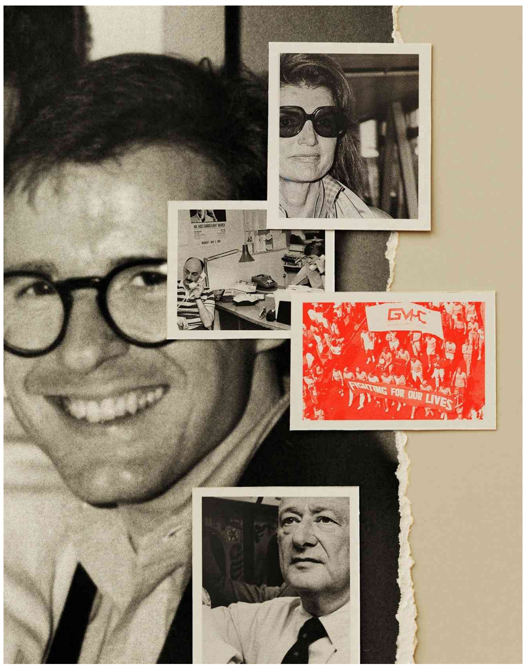
# Personal History

- **Finding My Way—and Staying Alive—During the AIDS Crisis**

# Finding My Way—and Staying Alive—During the AIDS Crisis

A diary of nineteen-eighties Manhattan.

By Thomas Mallon




In 1985, when I was thirty-three years old, I bought a studio apartment in Manhattan, near the United Nations. I'm there only very occasionally now, and have begun clearing the place out with an eye toward letting it go. The Library of Congress acquired a hundred and forty-six volumes of my diaries, which I've been keeping since the early nineteen-seventies. Before I handed over the mostly black-and-red notebooks in which I have chronicled my life, I scanned and downloaded the pages onto a thumb drive. The extracts below, which date from 1985 to 1988, offer glimpses of a young man trying to find his footing as a writer. They also offer a snapshot of a city in the grip of *AIDS*. Before moving into the apartment, I had had an affair with a young classicist named Thomas Curley (Tommy). He died of *AIDS*, at thirty-one, in October, 1984.

1985

A*ug*. 17: I went down to church [the Saturday-night gay Catholic Mass at St. Francis Xavier] at 7:30. . . . It was the usual cheerful Dignity service: lots of called-out intentions for people just dead from or diagnosed with *AIDS*; a boy in the pew in front of me with K.S. [Kaposi's sarcoma] on his nose, in exactly the spot where Tommy had it; a singer who did the Communion hymn—beautifully, too—who, I later learned, is a P.W.A. (person with *AIDS*).

A*ug*. 18: [The man I was seeing was] experiencing the old dichotomy, the same one in Tommy. The better he knows me, the harder it is to have sex. He's felt this before in his relationships, & it's what you always find in gay men who lived through the 70s. That much he's honest about. . . . I ask him —as I hold my breath—if he wants to call it a day. He says yes & no. No, because I'm "sensitive" & he likes being with me; yes, because he'd have "one less commitment." Part of him would be disappointed if I walked away, but he emphasizes that part of him would be relieved—that would solve all the ambiguities for him. . . .

I went down to Louise's [Tommy's mother]. She gave me dinner & I cried it out on her shoulder. She was glad. Because she wanted to mourn Tommy tonight. So we drank too much & did both because it all seemed part of the same wretched whole. Why, she wanted to know, has she so carefully arranged all his Latin and Greek books? "He's not coming back," she admits.

A*ug*. 31: Went down to church in a cab. Sparse crowd—whoever isn't dead from *AIDS* is out at Fire Island for the last weekend of summer. Ran into [G.J.] at the social. Hadn't seen his easy Irish face in months. He tells me he's got "a new little companion." I thought it might be a 17-year-old . . . but it turns out to be a wire-haired terrier.

S*ept*. 10: We've all been exposed, we're all living under the sword, & I'm no more lethal than anyone else. We're either going to get it or not. Period. I hate doing this algebra in my head, but maybe it helps keep one from going completely crazy.

S*ept*. 14: Lizzie [Elizabeth Hardwick] and I talked about N.Y. apartment prices & the New York *Times*. She agrees the copy editors are awful. "If you

say ‘Picasso,’ ” she said in her Kentucky squawk, “they make you put ‘the Spanish painter’ after it. . . .” I told her [about the book on plagiarism I was writing]. When Jacob Epstein’s name came up [he’d been caught putting material from Martin Amis’s first novel into his own], she turned a bit frosty. “You cain’t,” she said, thinking of her good friend Barbara’s boy. “You just cain’t. It ruined his life.” (Jacob has just been nominated for an Emmy for “Hill Street Blues.” It strikes me as a view typical of the *New York Review of Books* to think that this constitutes a ruined life.)

S*ept*. 23: I always fall for the truly cold—like [B.]—because I decide their reserve & awkwardness is really bottled-up warmth that they’re waiting for me to release—an act for which they’ll repay me with extravagant love.

O*ct*. 2: Took the train home. . . . First thing I saw outside the terminal was the *Post* announcing Rock Hudson’s death. Poor bastard. One day before Tommy’s anniversary. Poor all of us. The cover story in *New York* is about “the last word on avoiding *AIDS*.” One doctor makes me feel safe; another makes me certain I’ve got better than a 1 in 3 chance of getting *AIDS* or *ARC*. And Diane McGrath, the Republican candidate for mayor, wants to close not only the baths but the bars as well.

O*ct*. 17: This afternoon I saw Jacqueline Onassis twice within one hour. I was headed from the 86th St. station to the reservoir & saw her coming toward me. She is bone-slim, looks masked, and has hair that’s unaccountably in place without looking lacquered. She’s very tanned and looks older than her photographs. “So, honey,” I felt like saying, “how come you’re not at Doubleday? Playin’ hooky?” Maybe she’d just come home for a quick late-lunch tuna melt & to feed the cat. Anyway, I ranked it just beneath my Garbo sighting. Well, after I did my 3.2 [miles], and was heading back to the subway, whom should I see once more, walking west this time instead of east? Herself. We passed one another crossing Park Ave. I saw her stifling a yawn as she waited for the light to change.

O*ct*. 24: A double suicide on the news. Two men leapt from the 35th floor of a 3rd Ave. apt. house. One of them, 42, is thought to have had *AIDS*. He and his lover roped themselves together at the waist and jumped after toasting themselves with wine. The police found the apartment “immaculate.” There were even fresh-cut flowers.

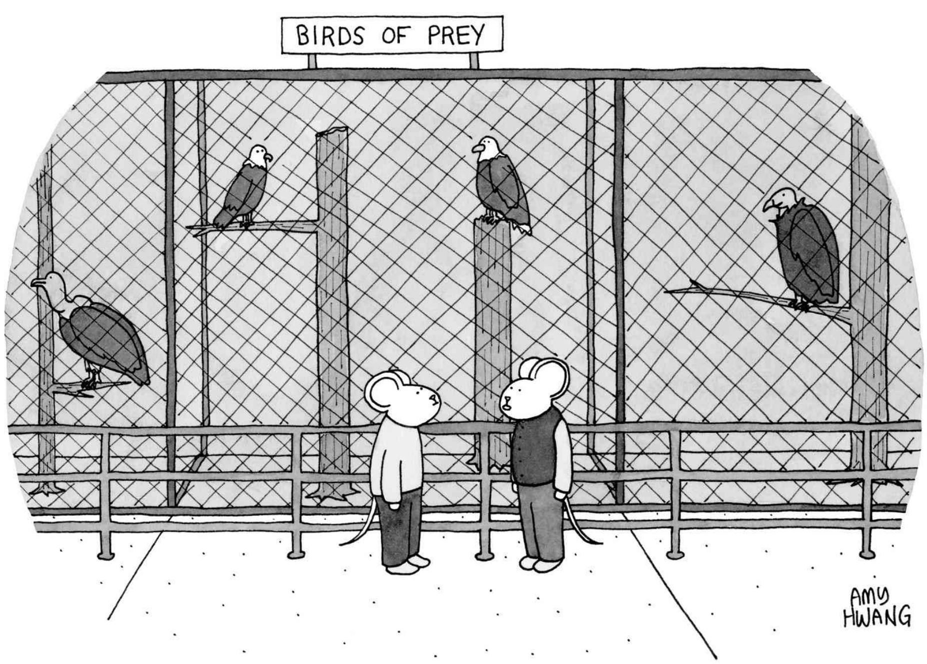
1986

J*uly* 14: I think I see Ed Koch more often than I do my mother. He came through the crowd tonight—blue-shirted, big-bellied, thumbs up—to start the [outdoor] concert. I'd say 4 people were clapping to every one who was booing: not a bad ratio for someone surrounded by scandal.

J*uly* 18: [Paul] & Tim met at a movie—a dirty movie. Paul says he now goes twice a week to Sexual Compulsives Anonymous at the Gay Community Center downtown. In fact, he came to the movie right from a meeting. He says he only has safe sex these days but that he goes after it just as compulsively as ever—& with emotional results just as miserable.

J*uly* 23: Another hot night. And the Hitachi sign near Columbus Circle lies. It never says worse than "warm"—I suppose because they don't want you associating Hitachi and discomfort.

J*uly* 30: Went up to Riverside Park for tonight's Front Runners [the gay running club] run. (Struck by the # of homeless actually trying to live in the park—little shanties & cookers.) Someone else . . . led the pack tonight. He explained that there were so few people there because a lot of people were attending somebody's memorial service.




*"They're scarier in the wild."*
*Cartoon by Amy Hwang*

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Aug. 3: It’s been three years since I slept with Tommy. Will I make it to five? Will I stop worrying after that? Will I ever stop worrying? Part of me would love to gamble & take the test & rejoice if it turned out negative. But

I can’t risk what would happen to my mind if it came back positive. I can’t do it. And a lot of doctors say one shouldn’t for that very reason: don’t risk the devastation.

S*ept*. 1: Labor Day, & no parade in New York. The unions decided there wasn’t enough interest and not much to celebrate, so they let everyone go to the beach instead. Ronnie [Ronald Reagan] has gotten everything he ever wanted!

S*ept*. 3: I realized it was Tommy’s birthday. . . . He’s been dead longer than I knew him alive.

S*ept*. 18: Should I kiss & make up with *National Review*? A few weeks ago they ran a cover story called “A Conservative States the Case for Gay Rights” and in the last issue there was an interesting, non-Neanderthal debate on the subject in the letters column.

S*ept*. 19: There was news today about AZT, a drug that’s having some success with *AIDS* patients. No cure, but it’s buying time. And they say it may be especially useful to those who have been [infected] but are not yet sick. There is so little good news, ever, that one feels almost giddy about this. God knows it’s made my day. I just hope it doesn’t have to try saving my life.

S*ept*. 21: I walked down to the Morgan Library to see the Housman exhibit. . . . But I much more enjoyed the exhibition of Mrs. Delany’s flowers, paper-cut collages of impossible intricacy made by an old lady in the 18th century. Yuppie mother to 8-year-old daughter: “Do you know that this lady lived 200 years ago?” Daughter’s reply: “So?”

S*ept*. 22: [Ted Hughes at the 92nd Street Y, where I had a fellowship]: Something about him—the voice, the boxer’s head ducked—reminded me of a Yorkshire Norman Mailer, but that makes him ridiculous & he’s not. He’s gorgeous & mean & no wonder two of his wives [sic] killed themselves. What a reading—not so much oral annotations of the poems (in advance) as great shaggy-dog narratives. Some wonderful WWI stuff about his father, and a beautiful, heroic poem about a salmon at the end. . . .

Then to the party for him at Shelley's on W. 70th Street. And who should be there but his big ugly sister Olwyn, with whom I had that tetchy correspondence over the Plath journals. At about 11:00 the party was beginning to thin & I feared I'd get into a position where I'd have to introduce myself. I decided it was time to leave, but she was between me & the door. So I told Shelley my name was Fred, & she said gotcha, & she showed me out, saying, "So glad you could come, Fred!" and I made my escape into the Manhattan night.

S*ept*. 30: Came home to a phone message from Greg. Dinner tomorrow night may fall through because Joe Norton, one of the guys we saw "The Color Purple" with, has died of *AIDS*. He was 24. I can't even remember his face—only Louis, the lover's. Oh, God help us all.

O*ct*. 1: Greg and I left phone messages with one another throughout the day & talked tonight. He went to the hospital. It turns out Joe won't be dead until tomorrow. (Now, there's a hell of a sentence.) They won't get the 3rd flat electroencephalogram until then; and only then can they unplug him. So his parents & Louis have begun to grieve while the machine is still beeping. And Greg tells me that the volunteer group he works for (doing wills for *AIDS* victims) wants him to go to the Bronx; that's where they're dying fastest now . . . and the yuppie lawyers don't want to go up there.

O*ct*. 13: Listened to Reagan's speech about Iceland. Despite what the media say, I think Reykjavík may have been his finest hour. If Star Wars is such a will-o'-the-wisp, as the TV boys keep saying, why are the Russians so dead set vs. our having it?

O*ct*. 17: So I went down to Charlie's and wound up flirting with someone named Chuck and wound up going home with him and sleeping with him in such a way as to put me (probably) in no physical danger, just more psychological peril. Is this the way I'm going to live the next twenty years, assuming I get to live them? . . . Just hoping that something wonderful will come along, but then, after another month or two has gone by . . . going out and finding something brief, and exciting, just plain releasing. Is this the only alternative to celibacy? . . . I seemed to need nothing in between all through my twenties. But I wasn't here in N.Y. then, & I wasn't psychologically out of my teens then.

O*ct*. 18: Going home in my dark glasses by late-morning light & sleeping it off. Sleeping off sleeping together. Frightened by how unmomentous this has become. . . . Do you know what this morning's conversation was mostly about? My lost sock.

And in a few days my body will start feeling hungry & I'll wonder if I shouldn't call him.

O*ct*. 19: Still trying to feel chastened, tidy, penitent, self-sufficient. Would I feel different if these weren't dangerous times? Or is there something about this loathing that has nothing to do with panic? Am I just, now and forever, a nice Catholic boy?

D*ec*. 14: In the evening Doug & I went down to the G.M.H.C. Christmas party at the Saint. Very festive, even though most of the food ran out while we were still in line. A # of straight people there. Older women, especially. Mothers of dead sons. A few brave souls walking around with heaped plates and obvious K.S. on their faces. And bits of the old days, "the scene," too: arrogant, beautiful bartenders, etc.

Doug left at around 10:00. He had a 7:00 *a.m*. meeting to look forward to. I stayed on for a while. A very cute, 34-year-old ex-policeman from Houston—he'd even been shot once—flirted with me & asked what chance there was we would leave together.

D*ec*. 17: It was getting late—I had to meet Greg—and so I dashed to 2nd Ave. for a cab, and it was one of those winter coming-home-from-work hours, when New York is swimming in light and movement and relief, and I felt glorious; wouldn't exchange any life for mine. I felt ready for Christmas. No one should be entitled to live in Manhattan before the age of 30. One can't appreciate or deserve it until then.

1987

J*an*. 8: [Met a friend] at the Hors D'Oeuvrerie, part of Windows on the World. We spent $50 for a couple of rounds of drinks & nibbles, but it was worth it—the night was gorgeously clear and all of N.Y. was below us (107th fl.). Such is my geography that I only later realized what I thought

was an exceptionally rural or blacked-out section of Queens was probably Jamaica Bay.

J*an*. 17: [I'd been on a few dates with a lawyer.] It turns out he'd already made plans for us to go to dinner with some of his friends. So I spent the evening at the apartment of 2 gay psychiatrists on Central Park West. They barely speak to one another, and then only to criticize. One of them spent a lot of the evening in another room. There was another couple there—& one of them was a psychiatrist, too. I was the youngest there by at least 10 years.

Some couples stay together for the sake of the children. I got the feeling our hosts stay together for the sake of the apartment—a huge thing into which entirely too much thought and work has gone. Just as too much thought and work goes into the food, the cats, the music. By eleven o'clock the opera singer had come off the turntable in favor of Barbara Cook, and then the telephone rang and one of the psychiatrists got a call with the news that one of his closest friends had just died of *AIDS* out in Los Angeles.

I felt I was getting one-two punches: the worst of the Old Homosexuality and the worst of the New.

J*an*. 22: We're in the middle of a blizzard. I trudged out of the Y at about 5:30 & learned that there were no trains running south of 86th St. on the Lexington line. So I caught a bus at 84th & 2nd—one of the few running. It was packed, and we moved no faster than a block a minute. I kept looking at an ad that said 1 in every 100 people is schizophrenic. And naturally the 1 on this bus carrying about 100 souls was standing and shouting right next to me.

J*an*. 28: The track around the reservoir had a hard pack of snow on it, but it was amazingly unslippery. My wind was good and I ran well. And at last this cough that's been hanging on seems to be going. I've been thinking more than usual about *AIDS*. Another part of the cycle everyone goes through, I suppose. On Monday, after I got the news from Katrina [my editor, saying my novel had sold], I thought: will I live to see it come out?

Now Liberace. And of course the usual denials. It's pernicious anemia brought on by a watermelon diet; it's emphysema; it's heart disease. I saw

him on a talk show over Christmas at Mom's. The second I saw his emaciated face on the screen, I thought: he's got it.

J*an*. 29: The N.B.C.C. Awards. I went to the Publicists' lunch in the old 5th Ave. Hotel. . . . It's the lunch they give for the reviewers each year. They are a raucous lot, really. Pushing Barbara Pym or "Thin Thighs in Thirty Days"—it's pretty much all the same to them. I sat between Ben and a friend of his named Michelle, who works for Franklin Watts & who's loud and funny. She talked about that . . . woman who was finally arrested for pretending to be Aristotle Onassis's sister, but only after she was able to pass a mint's worth of phony checks. "I've gotta take a urine test to do business in my own bank," Michelle says, "and this one's buying out a whole Radio Shack with a rubber check and no I.D."

J*an*. 31: I went into Caswell-Massey this afternoon to buy ear plugs & came out with a $45 hairbrush. And I don't even brush my hair.

F*eb*. 3: Liberace is dying & the Disease Control Center in Atlanta is talking about having everyone admitted to a hospital be required to take the *AIDS* test. So there will be lots of people breaking some ribs and leaving the next morning knowing they're antibody-positive? Wonderful.

F*eb*. 12: How I think these days: Just give me time enough to finish "Stolen Words." Draft "Aurora 7" [my second novel]. Then I can get sick. Just as a year ago I was making a bargain with God: just let me finish revising "Arts & Sciences." Maybe, if I'm lucky, I can keep this up for 40 years.

F*eb*. 13: Went to Howie the dentist this morning. A thorough cleaning and no problems. But my *AIDS* fears travel everywhere with me. Why, I think, is he asking me how my "general health" has been? And when he tells me that the remaining 2 wisdom teeth . . . will eventually have to come out, I think: what if I have it done overnight in a hospital? And what if by then they're giving the *AIDS* test to everyone? Will I wake up to hear a nurse tell me that my wisdom teeth are out & that, by the way, I'm antibody-positive?

F*eb*. 20: [N.] is scared of [possibly] being gay and being in N.Y., and so I sit across from him, feeling old & possibly lethal, offering my bromides and cautions & grounds for hope I certainly don't believe in.

F*eb*. 22: What irony: all that worry over being homosexual. And then, not much after it began to seem okay to be so, we must learn to practice every self-restraint we can think of.

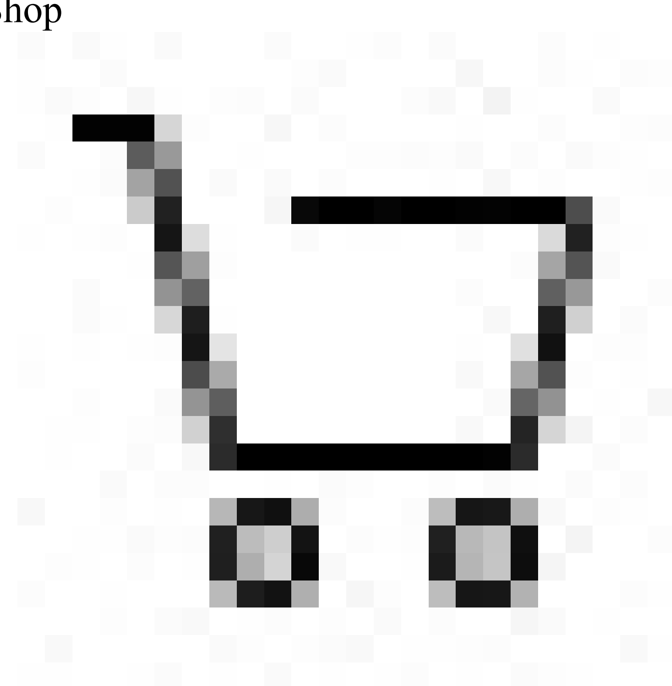


*“If you want to get anything done, talk to the guy in the corner.”*
*Cartoon by Frank Cotham*

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F*eb*. 23: In the afternoon I called Joyce [my lawyer] . . . to make an appointment to have my will done. . . . Melodramatic? Maybe the timing, though I’ve meant to do this anyway, since I do now have money, property, copyrights to think about. And consider this: she’s thinking of getting out of the wills business—too many of her clients have *ARC*, get *AIDS*, die, leave lovers who fight with parents. It’s become too depressing.

F*eb*. 24: I see mandatory *AIDS* testing coming. They won’t exactly drag one off the streets to do it, but they’ll make it a requirement for so many things —visas, hospital stays, insurance, licenses of all kinds—that it will become impossible to go much further through life without having [the test]. And millions will get psychological death sentences.

M*arch* 2: I ran. At 5:00 there was that gaudy color-photograph effect on the eastern edge of the reservoir. The sky was inky dark blue, and the buildings were as white as Marilyn Monroe’s teeth. A trick that God, the great showoff, kept up for a couple of minutes. It was spectacular. A strong wind, too—the track was sprinkled with feathers.

M*arch* 9: [Arthur Miller at the Y.] Pompous, old, overrated bore. He read from his memoirs (I counted 3 grammatical errors) & had the dumb

audience eating out of his hand. Even after he called it quits rather abruptly & left the stage at 9:00. At the party upstairs in the nursery school he never even took off his coat. Oh, Marilyn, how you must have missed Joe D.

M*arch* 18: Walking on 2nd Ave. in the 60s this morning I saw a blond woman walking in the other direction. I thought: "Gee, she's pretty." The mind tends toward understatement sometimes. I got a few steps closer and realized it was Catherine Deneuve.

M*arch* 22: A new crush: [N. and I] went to a coffee shop across from Lincoln Center and sat and talked about everything for hours. He had a fingernail paring caught between his teeth and repeated efforts to dislodge it with a toothpick succeeded only in bloodying his gums. That I found all this adorable instead of disgusting will tell you where I am.

M*arch* 23: Mona Simpson & three girls from *Paris Review* were [at a party] . . . chattering amongst themselves—and only themselves—like quadruplets who'd been raised in the forest.

M*arch* 26: Greg has the Vidalian fuck-&-move-on-&-count-on-your-friends-for-everything-else view. Which I accept as his, just as he understands my looking-for-the-Mr.-Right-One drive.

A*pril* 6: Doug calls & asks if I'd like to be on a segment of "Good Morning America" being produced by [his ex-boyfriend]. It's about love in the 80s & I'm supposed to function as a representative successful, reasonably attractive youngish gay man—filmed running in the Park, etc. Well, no, thanks. But I'm flattered.

A*pril* 20: Tommy's book has come out & it's brought back all the old disbelief that this ever could have happened. [Louise and I] talked about the latest *AIDS* horror stories in the press & I walked her home as far as 34th St., down 1st, past the bums getting ready for the night in their cardboard boxes in Ralph Bunche Park.

A*pril* 28: I opened the door at 7:30 to [G., an Italian writer], who, just as David said, is just this side of being handsome, but with a beautiful compact build and Florentine blue eyes. He has a son who's 9. He and his ex-wife are

both journalists & have been here for a year. He is charming, very smart, and very impetuous.

Yes. Satisfied? I'm no brighter than I ever was. But don't tell me I wasn't pushed. By 10:00 we'd killed a bottle of wine and he suggested we order in instead of going out for a meal. Well, that didn't leave much doubt.

If you want the truth without the details: we didn't do anything dangerous, but it was very exciting and romantic. Like with Carlo: I become very American, cute Tom Sawyer, with these Europeans, and they instantly know what little-boy buttons to push. And I was drunk & enjoying myself almost thoroughly, except I could hear the disquieting voice in the back of my head: why couldn't you wait? why couldn't he?

Why? Because it's unnatural to live without sex, even in the midst of this pandemic. . . .

But this is what really bothered me. He was playing my role—instantly smitten, on the verge of declaring love to someone he'd just met. And I could see the little laser point of truth somewhere behind my eyes. I'm not going to be able to feel it back.

[G. died in 1992.]

M*ay* 1: A report on ABC News tonight says *AIDS* may kill 50 million people in Africa. I went into one of my panics.

M*ay* 5: [Cooked dinner for N.] There were even moments tonight when I wasn't quite sure I liked him. He seemed a little bit too much the operator, the ambitious one. . . . (Everyone I get a crush on always starts out seeming sweet and ends up seeming real.)

M*ay* 7: [At the ballet with Louise.] Is it my imagination, or does the audience seem less gay than it did back in the late 70s? Are that many of us dead already?

M*ay* 8: Ran 5 miles. Over the Walkman I heard how Speaker Wright says the Conn. congressman's *AIDS* death shows we must act against the disease (i.e.—transfusion acquisition = innocence). Tonight, natch, his wife reveals

that Rep. McKinney did do it with the boys. So will Wright now call for less money?

M*ay* 9: My day began at 2 *a.m*. The buzzer rang and . . . I leapt out of bed, unnerved in a way one can only be in the middle of the night in N.Y.C.

It was Kenny. He was coming home from a party downtown and just happened to think maybe he'd stop by. Maybe we could watch a video. He is so young and bouncy that that would almost be plausible. But what he really wanted, of course, after months, was to make love.

Yes, I should have sent him home. But what am I supposed to be? A saint? (I've said this before here.) So, yes, we made love. Super safely—though I had to keep stopping him from doing more. He kept saying—can't we do this, can't we do that, I want that more than anything in the world—and I kept saying no, no, no. . . .

What is going to happen to this 21-year-old boy a year from now? When he meets someone who won't worry much about letting him take risks?

M*ay* 22: Picked up the copy-edited ms. of "A&S" on Vanderbilt Ave. Katrina & Larry have done a really meticulous job. Amazing how one *thinks* one knows how to spell & set up a story with clarity & continuity. Here and there I quibble, but on the whole I'm delighted to have people asking questions like: where did Shane's toothbrush suddenly come from?

M*ay* 26: I've got another cold. The last one came only 2 months ago. So I start thinking the unthinkable for a minute or two. And then, because the unthinkable is by definition something one can't think about . . . I blow my nose, take two aspirin and think about something else.

M*ay* 30: Greg's on a date. Someone he met last week called Damian. He said . . . that one sign of having been around the block too many times was being able to compare someone named Damian with *another* Damian one once went out with.

M*ay* 31: My wonderful Italian mother: she tells me that if I meet someone I really like & we're being intimate, we should each wear *two* rubbers because

she's heard on the news that rubbers sometimes break. It might as well be 1958: "Wear your rubbers when it rains."

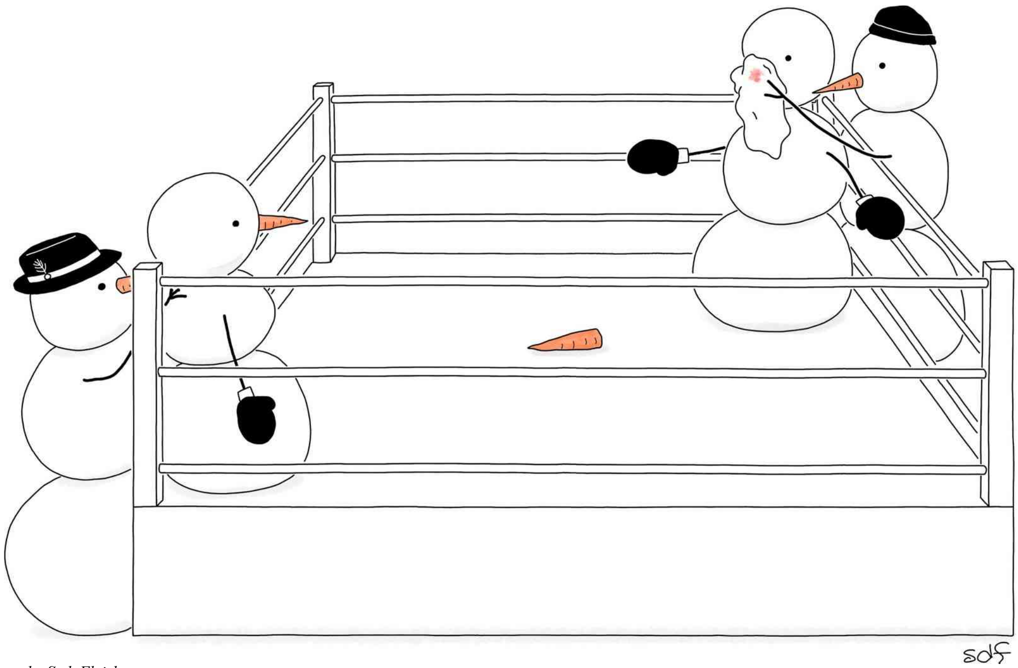
J*une* 19: [At the disco Private Eyes, with Greg and friends]: spent a couple of hours amidst the inane thumping music. One feels as if one is swimming through an ocean of Clinique between buffetings by phony pecs and shoulders. . . . We left around 2:00. (I think I know why one goes at all: . . . that blessed feeling of relief when you step out into the smokeless quiet of the street in the middle of the night.)

J*une* 21: Got up late & saw the rest of "The Right Stuff" [on VHS]. ("Finishing a movie" is something one does now in the morning, the way one used to finish the novel or magazine article one put on the night table before clicking out the light.)

A*ug*. 21: Went down to Tom Victor's apartment/studio near 5th & 20th at 3:00 [to have my author photo taken]. A huge loft; a movie producer's idea of how the successful photographer lives. . . . Tom is very flirtatious & feel-copping: the desired effect is to relax the subject—in my case it has something of the opposite effect at first. But basically he's a nice guy & I did begin to enjoy myself. Felt a little like Tammy Faye Bakker when he applied eyeliner, blusher, and lipstick to me, but this is s.o.p. Then came hundreds of snappings: on the couch, by the wall, by the bookshelves, out on the street against brick walls, against the iron railings near Teddy Roosevelt's house. It's a strange feeling of simultaneous self-esteem and depersonalization that it gives you: on the one hand you feel as if no one in any situation could ever again pay you this much attention; but on the other, you know that shampoo bottles must be photographed with just as much loving care for ad pages. . . . Tom clicks and says: "Oh yes!"—click—"Yes!"—click— . . . "Fabulous!"

Everyone should have an afternoon like this.

A*ug*. 28: Grace Schulman . . . entered my name in her address book near Bernard Malamud's [d. 1986], which gave me the creeps. . . .

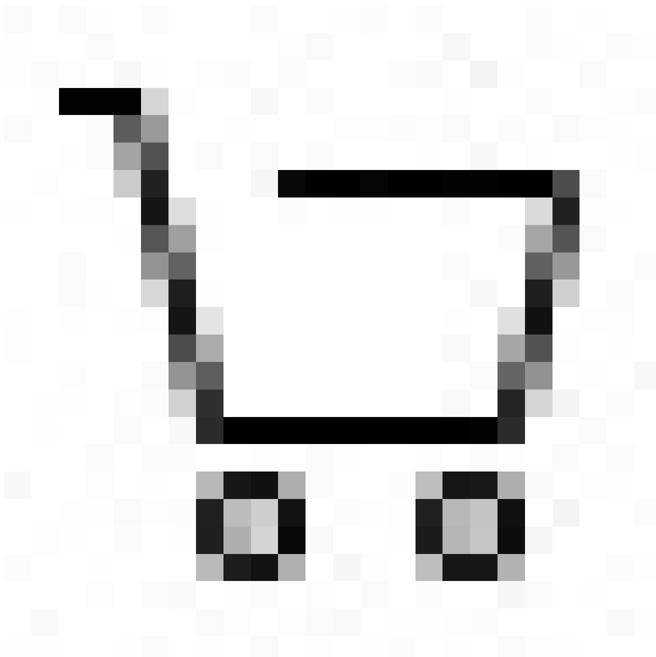


*Cartoon by Seth Fleishman*

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I found a letter from Mary [McCarthy] in Maine. Will see her on the 21st—at the Y, in fact. She says no one asked her to write anything on the Iran-Contra hearings, which she hopes says something about the hearings instead of herself. *Corriere della Sera* asked her to cover the Barbie trial, but she's glad she didn't.

Greg, just back from vacation in Miami, called. Of course I told him about [a lawyer I'd begun to date]. . . . The only thing that bothers him, he says, is my Hamlet complex about romance. I want it & don't want it & immediately upon starting something find reasons to discontinue it. When Greg lectures he can be a little stricter than I'd like—but he's right.

S*ept*. 11: [T.] called from Berkeley this afternoon. His test results are, thank God, negative. The swollen glands? Perhaps hypochondria, perhaps anxiety (getting sick with worry over the possibility of being sick), perhaps nothing. I am relieved, thankful, thrilled.

S*ept*. 17: I got a call from a woman at "Nightline" today: would I help with a program they're putting together on Plagiarizing Joe Biden? They wanted political anecdotes, but thought the one I gave them about Disraeli was a little too esoteric.

S*ept*. 19: At 11:30 Greg, Michael, Steve & I got in a cab on Columbus Ave. to go out to Williamsburg for Jean-Luc's party. The cab driver greeted our announced destination with stony silence, but we got there, going over the crumbling bridge out of the Lower East Side, for 17 bucks. . . . [T]he building Jean-Luc was in isn't so bad. And the party was a kind of wild Blake Edwards mix: . . . some people just off a plane from Paris; an effeminate history graduate student, very sweet, named David; an angel-boy, a young Swiss drummer, . . . a gay couple wearing identical children's pajamas passed out on a mattress in one of the bedrooms; a couple of artists, I think; little twinkies and punky beer drinkers; the sweet super of the building, from Ecuador.

O*ct*. 2: [My agent] called this afternoon. Michael J. Fox's "people" have passed on "A&S" because Michael is seeking more "heroic" roles.

O*ct*. 28: [W]atched the "Firing Line" debate among the six Republican "hopefuls" between 9 & 11. Bush did well: he's less inane & tinny in give-and-take than when he makes a speech. Dole looked embalmed, but loosened up later. Kemp's discharges are all canned, but his delivery isn't bad & he surprises people by being bright. Haig & DuPont [sic] were hapless. . . . And then there was Robertson, with the same affectless, shit-eating grin on for every sentence. The 5 others are making just the mistake with him that the Democrats did with Jackson in '84—fawning over him, praising him for bringing new registered voters to the party. . . . This will only hurt the party in the long run—the fawning, that is; it makes independent moderates sick.

N*ov*. 7: Spent the evening at [the drama critic] Robert Massa's 30th birthday party on W. 13th St. . . . [M]ixed in with all Robert's artistic friends and colleagues on the *Voice* and gay activists like David Rothenberg was his family from New Jersey. His short Italian [and Irish] parents seemed good-willed and a little bewildered, I'll-take-it proud of this son whose last piece in the *Voice* was about being arrested at the Supreme Court (a couple of days after the gay-rights march) during the civil-disobedience demo. ("Your shoes don't match your gloves!" the protesters shouted to the D.C. policemen wearing plastic gloves to protect them from *AIDS*.) Robert's brother James, a priest, with whom he argues all the time, was also there. A quiet lookalike. We talked for a time. I told him that those of us who would like to be

reconciled with the Church are more mainstream in other ways than he may think. . . . Robert was all dressed up—he looked as if he were making his First Communion. He said . . . "Just turning 30 these days seems like an accomplishment." *AIDS*, of course. It's never more than 10 minutes away from one's conscious mind. On my way to the party I ignored a panhandler in my usual slightly guilt-ridden way. He shouted after me: "I hope something real bad happens to you."

[Robert Massa died in 1994.]

N*ov*. 10: The real story [of the Joel Steinberg – Hedda Nussbaum case]—the only one anyone talks about—as much as they talked about the baby in the well a few weeks ago—or the little girl who survived the air crash—is the story of the little girl battered to death by her monster drugged-up father & perhaps her mother, who was beaten for years by the father. Insane, bloody beatings on W. 10th St. "Parents" who went out of their way to adopt a child. The mother once wrote children's books.

N*ov*. 21: A party tonight at John Cahillane's on LaGuardia Place. A party to celebrate his friend Nicholas's green card. Maybe 40 people, almost all gay men. At one point I found myself talking to a 6'5" blond neurosurgeon, Harvard '77, a rower, a dream come true, who, in a sudden grab-assy movement—so evidently taken by my charm was he—managed to spill half a glass of red wine, mine, on that new sweater I didn't need. . . . Alas, by the time an hour more had passed, he had goosed nearly everyone in the room with the same degree of interest and gusto. They didn't get stained with wine, though.

N*ov*. 23: [Tom Victor at the Y, where he was the house photographer for the Poetry Center]: he looks awful. He's dropped a lot of weight since I saw him last. His voice is hoarse & he does certain things sitting that you know he would do standing if he were feeling better. He says he's been on a macrobiotic diet to lose weight. But one knows that macrobiotic diets are what scared people are going on to fire up their immune systems.

Oh, God, I hope not. He's a nice man.

[Thomas Victor died in 1989.]

D*ec*. 2: One measure of how agitated I am just now, how close my feelings are to the surface: at the end of the last seminar of the term [teaching at Vassar], my standard-issue run through the [First World] war poets, I was reading them out a bit of Stanley Weintraub's book on the Armistice (an awful passage about [a kid] shot five minutes before 11:00 *a.m*., 11/11/18) and I started to snuffle & break down & could barely get through it. Nothing to be embarrassed about (in fact, the students like that kind of thing), but not the sort of thing I usually do.

D*ec*. 5: At the intermission [of "The Nutcracker"] one realizes that the audience is, for once, overwhelmingly heterosexual. The yuppies force all their little girls into velvet and bows, a conspicuous consumption of Victoriana. The little girl playing Clara is having the high point of her life, all too early.

1988

F*eb*. 12: [My agent] gives me a big official-publication-day hug two days early. I walked all the way home (the rain was lighter); Friday night rush-hour twinkling. I looked up at the Metropolitan Life clock—5:40—and felt dazzled by my luck. How could I have guessed, ten years ago, that I'd have come even this far, that I'd be here, making it?

F*eb*. 13: Came home with the *Times* tonight. A front-page article on how the virus isn't spreading to many gay men anymore (so safe sex apparently is safe)—but how a great harvest of souls is imminent. They actually say that a large portion of the gay male population in S. Fran. & N.Y. will be "wiped out" over the next several years. Everyone who got the virus in the early 80s—did I get it 5 years ago next week?—will be dying. Or nearly everyone. And you know what this means: since the virus has stopped spreading and heterosexuals are safe, the search for a cure will slow. The dying will be allowed to die—nature's adjustment of the surplus, perverted population. Gays won't be extinct; they'll just be reduced & contained. In their secret hearts many people will think the shriving a good thing.

And will I be gathered in with the quarter of a million still to die? I tell myself I want only to finish these 2 books—let me see them done & out & then I'll go quietly. That's what I tell myself, anyway. ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

## Poems

- **“Over there in that garden”**
- **“Poem for Grown Children”**

**By Meret Oppenheim**

***Audio:*** *Read, in English and in the original German, by the translator.*

Over there in that garden
There lie my shadows
That cool my back.

They're up in the garden
Squabbling over old bread
And clucking like chickens.

Today I want to visit them
Today I want to greet them
And number their noses.

*—Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985)*

*(Translated, from the German, by Kathleen Heil.)*

*This is drawn from "The Loveliest Vowel Empties."*

**By Joshua Rothman**

**By Patricia Marx**

**By Marion Renault**

**By Amanda Petrusich**

**By** **Kathleen Driskell**

***Audio:*** *Read by the author.*

In a poem I love, the husband slices open
a pepper to find a church,

but here at the sink I've found a house, and
inside the rattling seeds of a chandelier.

It doesn't matter. My husband is too by himself
in the hospital, and in our home at the window I stand

alone for the first time in almost thirty years. Then,
he'd rushed out into the dark, summoned to

his father's deathbed. But I wasn't really alone.
My toddler son slept, his mouth slightly open

and red and wet inside, like a fledgling's;
my daughter grew within me, close

as a locket on a chain. When my husband returned,
I remember he talked of the rattle. The death rattle.

The children are now inside their own homes,
asleep, curled around their beloveds. But all so young

yet, they do not think we will ever die.
In their garden beds, if they are dreaming of seeds

and light, they are dreaming of little blazes
growing hotter. They are not dreaming of wind

and flickering. And, certainly, they are not
dreaming of smoke.

*This is drawn from "The Vine Temple."*

**By Joshua Rothman**

**By Marion Renault**

**By Amanda Petrusich**

**By Stephania Taladrid**

## Shouts & Murmurs


- The Procrastination Diary of Merrick Garland

By Anand Giridharadas

**The Postpone Your Procrastination Diary™**
*"Because later is, in fact, never."*
Student name: Merrick Garland
Diary due date: 11/7/2022
Actual submission date: 11/18/22
Comments: Sorry! Again. —MG

**October 11th**
I don't really remember what happened on October 1st, the day I was supposed to start keeping this diary. It's been a lot.

**October 12th**
Got some good momentum going. On this diary, I mean. Two days in a row. I can do this. Don't let them get to you, Merrick. You can finish what you start. You have what it

**October 15th**
At the beginning of every month, as I promised my Postpone Your Procrastination personal coach, Stu, I will make a to-do list, prioritizing what is important and realistically estimating how much time each task will take. This month, my priority is indicting Trump. If I can just free up a couple of hours, I feel like I've got him.

**October 17th**
I am about to get going on an Espionage Act charge, which you don't see every day, but you don't end up seeing it on this day, either, because Wirecutter comes out with a new writeup of espresso machines. There goes the afternoon/the rule of law.

**October 18th**
Feeling guilty about yesterday, I come to the office at 4:30 *a.m.* to try to get my daily yogurt-making out of the way so I can concentrate on the big prosecution. I mistakenly let the last batch run out, so I need to go around asking my deputies if anyone has a spoonful of yogurt they can spare to get my new batch going. Not a lot of D.O.J. officials make yogurt at the office, it turns out, but I find an unguarded Yoplait cup in a mini-fridge, and by noon I can turn my focus to work.

But, also, I feel like the espresso machine I ordered yesterday may not have the steam power I'm looking for. So I check to see if I can cancel it. Because it's a third-party seller, Amazon passes me around to different customer-service agents for two hours, which is ridiculous, given my responsibilities. It makes me think I should also stop procrastinating going after the illegal monopoly that that company represents.

**October 20th**
My coach, Stu, recommends the "treats" approach, where you plan little rewards for staying focussed. Today, I try this, leaving the building to buy and smoke a single cigarette every time I finish a paragraph of the upcoming indictment. People don't realize how hard it is to go looking for loosies when you have a security detail. I end up leaving the building twenty times—a whole pack's worth—which is a good sign: it means twenty paragraphs done!

**October 21st**
Stu has been telling me to peel the onion of the inner beliefs that encourage procrastination. I spend the day journaling about that. Part of me feels like my indictment has to be perfect, so that's why I put it off. Then, there's the self-doubt that creeps in. Who am I to be indicting Donald Trump? So I stand in front of the floor-length mirror I had installed in my personal bathroom and make power poses, flexing different muscles. It helps.

The excuses flood my brain: It's too early to indict him. It's too late to indict him. I need to hit the gym first. I'm better under pressure; let's wait until Biden's last day in office. I must do laundry. Above all, I'm tired. I need a vacation, but I keep putting it off.

**October 23rd**
Stu says I need a new rhythm and maybe a change of scene. So this morning I tell the security team I'll drive myself in. I park in the department garage, put down the seat, and tuck myself in at around 9:30 *a.m.* By sleeping during the day, I will avoid the distraction of unnecessary meetings. My plan is to sneak into the building after everyone leaves and finally get to work drafting memos on the possibility of possible steps.

**October 24th**
So, circadian rhythms are actually hard to change, and I end up sleeping in my car for twenty-four hours. CNN goes wall-to-wall with a "Where's Merrick?" chyron. After I finish eating the homemade yogurt I had brought to the garage with me, I return home and take a day off to recover from this episode.

**October 26th**
Stu told me to find an "accountability partner." Great idea. I got in touch with a college buddy who is totally outside my professional world and has a lot of money. I told him a few months ago: Len, if I don't indict Trump by October 15th, I want you to send a donation in my name to the Proud Boys every day until I do. So today I get in the mail a thank-you from Proud Boys HQ. Apparently, I am now their top donor, which could raise conflict issues.

**October 28th**
The draft indictment is coming along! I have fifty-three pages—halfway there! I take a moment to celebrate the milestone, and cruise social media. I accidentally lose the next four hours executing what you might call a search warrant of nostalgia on my college girlfriend.

**October 29th**
Feeling bad about my procrastination yesterday, I practice the most powerful of Stu's techniques: visualization. I sit at my desk trying to imagine the moment when they cuff him. Better yet: the moment when I cuff him. I wonder if they'll let me do that. It would be so cool. I spend the rest of the day at the library looking for books that clarify whether an Attorney General can do that.

**October 30th**
The work goes on, but slowly, to be honest, because I am daydreaming at my desk. Mostly about the parade that will happen when I finally deliver. It's a lot to have the rule of law dependent on one man, me, little Merrick—crazy, really. I snap out of the daydream when Josephine, the janitor, knocks on the door. "General Garland," she says, "I believe the sausages you have hanging in your conference room have properly cured. Would you like me to take them down from the ceiling?"

Josephine is so great. I tell her not to worry. I will take care of the sausages. I have the time. I just love the process of making them. ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

# Tables for Two


- **The Spectrum of Congee**

By [Hannah Goldfield]

Among au-courant gifts for expectant parents—especially those who use the term "self-care" unironically—is Heng Ou's book "The First Forty Days: The Essential Art of Nourishing the New Mother." It's inspired by *zuo yuezi*, or "sitting the month," the Chinese postpartum tradition of spending several weeks after a baby is born doing little but resting and tending to the body. In a section on congee, Ou describes the rice porridge as "one of the most reassuring meals you can eat." Soft, warm, and easy to digest, it's also a "blank canvas on which to improvise," made with broth or water, endlessly customizable.



*Layla Chen's passion for grits and for her Chinese heritage led her to focus on congee, which she makes with both jasmine and brown rice, plus quinoa, dried bay leaves, and medjool dates.*

You can find congee at many restaurants in Manhattan's Chinatown, including, perhaps most famously, Congee Village (100 Allen St.), which opened in 1996. A more surprising place to find it is in brownstone Brooklyn. In 2017, Layla Chen took over the sandwich shop Bed-Stuy Provisions and slowly transformed it into Maya Congee Café (563 Gates Ave.), named for her now five-year-old daughter. Chen had initially wanted to offer grits, her favorite thing to order at the beloved, now shuttered Bed-Stuy bakery Scratchbread. But when she hired Scratchbread's proprietor, Matthew Tilden, as a consultant, he suggested leaning into her roots. When

Chen was seven, her family moved from Guangdong to Hawaii, where her dad opened a Chinese food-court counter.



*The Wake Me Up congee includes smoked cheese, a soft-boiled egg, spicy shredded pork, avocado, and fried shallots.*

Chen's parents made congee when she was growing up, and, indeed, she ate congee in the weeks after Maya was born. On Nov. 1, roughly forty days after the birth of her second child, Chen opened a second Maya Congee Café, in Clinton Hill (1013 Fulton St.), in a bigger, brighter space, with indoor seating, and an elegantly modular menu, consisting of components prepared in an off-site kitchen which can be warmed and assembled, in dozens of ways, à la minute.



*Chen recently added a black-sesame mochi cake to her evolving menu.*

The congee is made with both jasmine and brown rice, plus quinoa and, for a touch of sweetness, medjool dates, a combination that Chen pointedly qualifies, on the menu, as "*NON-TRADITIONAL*," and which gives it a satisfyingly thick, creamy texture and a gentle nuttiness. Cooked in water seasoned with bay leaves, it happens to be vegan, and it's easy to keep it as such, even with plenty of toppings: roasted peanuts, avocado, shaved broccoli, Chen's superlative salsa (ginger, turmeric, jalapeño, and garlic), crispy shallots out of giant tubs imported from Vietnam—which are available for purchase among the café's pantry items.

Omnivores can choose from a range of proteins, including braised chicken (the leftover braising liquid is mixed with the salsa for a rich, fortifying soup); spicy shredded pork; a house-made smoked-cheese blend; a soft-boiled hen egg or a tangy preserved duck egg, whose whites have gone black and glossy; and a surprisingly successful dollop of smoked whitefish salad. Most of these are also available on toasted hero rolls, for what Chen calls nontraditional banh mi.



*Pantry items for sale include tinned fish, chili crisp, and spicy honey.*

To traditionalists, I say that tradition is in the eye of the keeper; Chen's mother has always liked to add alternate grains, such as millet, to her congee. Moreover, Congee Village, which expanded to Flushing (36-36 Prince St.) in 2016, has opened another location in Manhattan (207 Bowery), in August. On a recent afternoon, I popped in for a clay pot of sampan congee, named for the small boats that cruise the Pearl River in Guangdong, whose operators sell the porridge laced with a mix of meat and seafood. My congee—made with only white rice, loose and silky—was topped with cilantro and peanuts. Within its steamy depths, I found delicate curls of squid tentacle, sliced fish cake, pork rinds, and ribbons of roasted pig skin. I added splashes of thick soy sauce, spoonfuls of chili oil, and segments of *you tiao*, twists of fried dough served at breakfast in China, and felt thoroughly nourished by the spectrum of congee. *(Maya Congee Café congee bowls $10-$15; Congee Village congee $4.95-$12.95.)* ♦

**By Hannah Goldfield**

**By Hannah Goldfield**

**By Hannah Goldfield**

**By Hannah Goldfield**

# The Current Cinema

- Brendan Fraser’s Soft Quizzicality in “The Whale”

By Anthony Lane

Few actors have done more to promote the power of innocence than Brendan Fraser. Go back to the first wave of his fame, and to the gag that ran through his drollest roles. In "Encino Man" (1992), he was an early human, frozen solid during an ice age, defrosted by high-school kids, and invited to party down. In "George of the Jungle" (1997), he was a Tarzanesque vine-swinger let loose in San Francisco. And, in the charming "Blast from the Past" (1999), he was born in a nuclear bunker, raised on pure Americana, and eager, when he emerged after thirty-five years, to marry somebody from Pasadena. In each case, California was held up as the acme of civilization, and Fraser as a figure who knew almost nothing, bore no ill will, and was ready to be happily surprised. Get a load of those peepers, primed to pop! And that cartoon grin! When the meek are built like Johnny Weissmuller, it seems a little easier to believe that they might yet inherit the Earth.

Fraser then swung out of orbit, and partially faded from public view. If you missed him in the confusingly titled "The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor" (2008), or in "The Poison Rose" (2019), where he was billed below John Travolta and Morgan Freeman, don't feel too bad. Now, though, Fraser is back, looming large in "The Whale." He plays Charlie, who lives on his own and teaches literature classes online, explaining to his students, who can't see him, that the camera on his computer is broken. This is untrue. Charlie doesn't *want* to be seen, because his mind, however nimble, is housed in a body so gravely obese—the actor is robed in prosthetic fat—that a simple trip to the bathroom becomes an odyssey. Only when he eats does Charlie move fast, rootling through a drawer in search of chocolate bars, as busy as a jewel thief, or ripping slices from a pizza and hurrying them into his pie hole.

"The Whale" is directed by Darren Aronofsky and written by Samuel D. Hunter, who has adapted his play of the same name. Most of the action is set in two or three rooms, and Aronofsky strives to dispel any air of the theatrical; near the start, we are taken on a guided tour of Charlie, circling around him like travellers marvelling at a mountain, and there are times when his bulging features, in closeup, all but congest the screen. No playgoer would be granted such intimate privilege. What stymies the film, though, is not so much the confined space in which it unfolds—Hitchcock

made do with less in “Rope” (1948) and “Rear Window” (1955)—as the stagy clunk with which other characters enter and exit that space. I half expected Charlie to exclaim, “Goodness gracious! Who could *that* be, at this hour?” as we hear a knock on the door.

One visitor is Charlie’s good friend Liz (Hong Chau), who is also a nurse, and makes no bones about the fate of his flesh. Who else would take his blood pressure, announce that he will soon die of heart failure, *and* bring him a sub to gorge on? Then, we have a young missionary, Thomas (Ty Simpkins), who drops in at random, asks Charlie, “Are you aware of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?,” and winds up smoking weed. More challenging is the arrival of Charlie’s daughter, Ellie (Sadie Sink), and later of his ex-wife, Mary (Samantha Morton). Both were estranged from him for years, after he fell in love with a man, but they now show up and embroil Charlie in highly wrought conversation. “You’re disgusting,” Ellie tells him, but he offers to help her with an essay for school, and her anger slowly melts. Could it be that Charlie, alone in his vastness, is valued after all?

“The Whale” is laughably earnest, larded with melodrama, and designed to shut down the long-standing association of human bulk with high spirits. Forget the tumid wit of Falstaff—“that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts,” as Prince Hal calls him—or the sinister bonhomie of Sydney Greenstreet. The film presents us with obesity as tragedy, and as a preventable scourge inflicted on the hero by a hostile and traumatizing world. (The villain, needless to say, is evangelical Christianity.) Here, in short, is a self-regarding drama of self-loathing: hardly the most appetizing prospect. If it proves nonetheless to be stirringly watchable, we have Brendan Fraser to thank. Returning to the spotlight, he continues to radiate an essential sweetness of nature. His line readings have lost none of their soft quizzicality, and he even ventures a giggle; as Charlie, so often does he apologize that I began to suspect him of being secretly British. Inside the whale is a still small voice of calm.

How does the story of Pinocchio begin? For Carlo Collodi, whose tales of the wooden child were published as a book in 1883, everything kicked off with violence—with a log moaning in fear at being struck by carpenter’s tools, and with two old men fighting over it. Walt Disney, in 1940, plumped for coziness: the carolling cricket, and the mock-alpine fantasy of Geppetto’s

shop, its peace broken only by ticking clocks. In the latest retelling, officially titled "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio," the tone of choice is pathos. We first meet Geppetto as he mourns a real boy: his son, Carlo, whom he cherished and lost. Pinocchio, in other words, fashioned in a drunken fit, is a *replacement*.

It's a hell of a suggestion, and it accounts for the emotional thrust of what ensues. This Pinocchio will behave, throughout his exploits, as if he had plenty to prove and nothing much to lose, like someone who knows he was merely half wanted to start with. His basic locomotion is a kick-and-hop, and that reckless onward rush is an ideal match for the animation that drives the film along. The technique is that of stop-motion, and the effect is far smoother than it was in the old Ray Harryhausen epics—though the jerkiness of the stop-motion skeletons, in "Jason and the Argonauts" (1963), made them more spooky, not less—but there remains a welcome smack of the homemade, gnarly and sticklike. This is the kind of movie that Geppetto would create in his dreams.

Parts of the narrative will seem familiar, especially to anyone weaned on Disney. Once again, Pinocchio (voiced by Gregory Mann) is lured away from Geppetto (David Bradley) and recruited into the circus by a vulpine rogue (Christoph Waltz). There is still a cricket in the offing, but his name is Sebastian (Ewan McGregor), not Jiminy, and there's a cruel farce in the way he keeps getting knocked about and smashed. This remorselessness, and the characters' ability to rise again after meeting the blows of fate, reach a very strange apogee in Pinocchio's regular deaths. Time after time, he finds himself in a darkling underworld, where rabbits act as pallbearers, and where a glowing blue sphinx (Tilda Swinton), tricked out with buffalo horns and a lashing tail, lectures him on eternity and grief. Whereupon the boy bounces back to life: a rubber soul within a frame of wood.

How to respond to this? Well, readers of Collodi will warm to the blend of fatalism and hope—"When the dead cry, it means they're on the way to recovering," as a crow says in the book. And parents will ask themselves if it was *quite* such a good idea to drag their youngest offspring to the new movie, and what the chances will be, come evening, of getting them to sleep. (It's certainly more of a nightmare than "Nightmare Alley," del Toro's previous work, released last year.) Oh, and be warned: the film takes place

during the upsurge of Fascism, and provides a withering cameo for Mussolini, who is taunted by Pinocchio with poop jokes. So, if you are taking the kids, you'll obviously need to fill them in on twentieth-century Italian political history while you're lining up for Cherry Vanilla Cokes. No pressure.

To be honest, del Toro has thrown too much into the mix. For no compelling reason, for instance, and to unresounding effect, the movie also happens to be a musical. Imaginative overflow, however, is always more appealing than a dearth, and though the rounded beauty of Disney's draftsmanship—remember the cathedral-like cavern of the whale's interior—can never be erased, the angularity of this latest attempt has a piercing punch of its own. Nowhere more so than when Pinocchio, standing in the nave of a church, stares up at a Crucifixion. Like him, it has been carved by Geppetto, and, in honor of that affinity, Pinocchio suddenly cricks and skews himself to mimic the posture of Jesus in his agony. It's an astonishing moment, undoubtedly blasphemous, yet touched with more wonder than derision. Suffer little children, even the ones made of pine.

Precisely how much Netflix paid, last year, to acquire the Roald Dahl estate is unconfirmed. Low estimates murmur of six hundred million dollars. In the wake of that transaction comes "Matilda the Musical"—a new movie, directed by Matthew Warchus, jammed with larky songs by Tim Minchin, and based on the show that was based on a novel by Dahl. And how deliciously uncomfortable it is, may I say, to observe Mrs. Wormwood (Andrea Riseborough), the heroine's mother, testifying to her tackiness by waving wads of cash and crying, "Money! Money!" Ugh. Horrible stuff.

If Geppetto was alarmed by the advent of Pinocchio, Mrs. Wormwood and her husband (Stephen Graham) are appalled by their daughter's birth. Nobody wished for her upon a star. As a young girl (Alisha Weir), she is loathed by her parents, not least for her literacy; following Dahl's cue, the film is an ode to the bliss of reading ("like a holiday in your head," Matilda says), which unchains you and renders you dangerous to tyrants. Hitherto self-educated, Matilda goes to school at Crunchem Hall, where she stands out as a freethinker, to the delight of her teacher, Miss Honey (Lashana Lynch), and the thunderous annoyance of the headmistress, Miss Trunchbull

(Emma Thompson). A former hammer thrower, Miss Trunchbull now contents herself with tossing her pupils into an adjacent field.

Like “Pinocchio,” the saga of Matilda goes where “The Whale” fears to tread, into the murky and Dickensian comedy of abuse. Miss Trunchbull is descended from other principals whose names smell of torture, like Thomas Gradgrind, in “Hard Times,” or Wackford Squeers, in “Nicholas Nickleby”—the first book that Matilda mentions, in the film, when asked what she’s been reading of late. Of all the beneficiaries of Dickens, none have been more influential than Disney and Dahl. Both deal in the heartfelt popular grotesque; turpitude spawns moral and physical gargoyles, whom the virtuous (preferably not simpering but impish, like Matilda) must learn to trounce. It seems fitting, then, that the best thing about Warchus’s film should be the energy of the children. Confidently led by Weir, they swarm the screen. Picking up where the urchins of “Oliver!” (1968) left off, they hymn their climactic liberation with an anthem that binds the messy to the insurgent, glorying in the most Dahlian of all words: “We’re Revolting!” ♦

**By Janet Malcolm**

**By Robert A. Caro**

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

**By Philip Gourevitch**

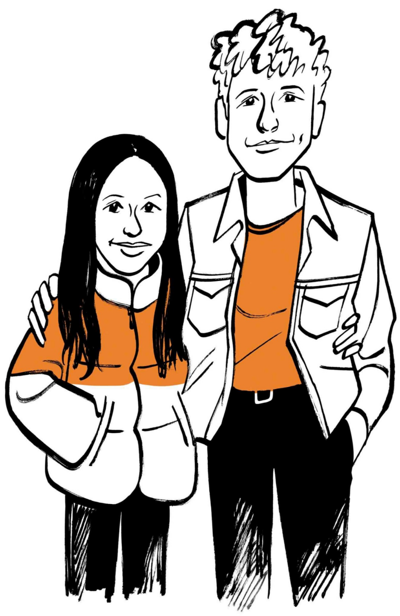
## The Pictures

- **The Nivola Kids Enter the Family Business**

# The Nivola Kids Enter the Family Business

Alessandro Nivola and Emily Mortimer didn't want their kids, Sam and May, to get into movies; Noah Baumbach, the director of "White Noise," had other ideas.

By [Michael Schulman]



Sam Nivola, a nineteen-year-old with wispy brown hair and dimples, came down from his Morningside Heights apartment to meet his twelve-year-old sister, May. The Nivolas are the children of actors, Alessandro Nivola ("The Many Saints of Newark") and Emily Mortimer ("The Newsroom"), and have lately joined the family racket. In the new Noah Baumbach film, "White Noise," they play siblings in a Reagan-era academic household led by Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig, who are forced to flee their college town after an "Airborne Toxic Event." Sam, as it happens, had just fled the Nivola home, in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, to attend Columbia.

"Absolutely hate it," he reported. "I decided to go here because it's in the city, and I didn't want to be in Poughkeepsie or whatever. Annoyingly, there's a lengthy list of prerequisites you have to take in order to take

anything interesting, so right now I'm doing, like, Film 101, which is watching 'Citizen Kane' and having a bunch of kids being, like, 'I think it's interesting how the shadows symbolize darkness.' " He wore a green sweater and cologne that his mother had brought him from Italy. ("I normally have really bad B.O., so I try to mask it.")

His parents drove up to Columbia with May, who wore a pink North Face jacket. It was family weekend, and the parents were off to a lecture about "how to carry on learning in your later life," Mortimer said. Before leaving, she advised Sam, "Don't diss Columbia in the interview."

Parentless, the siblings strolled to a deli, where Sam answered his cell phone. "Dad just called me and yelled at me for talking shit about Columbia," he said with a shrug. They took their lunches to a nearby park. "My parents had always been really adamant about us *not* getting into that industry," Sam said. He found out about "White Noise" through his school, St. Ann's, where May is now in seventh grade, and made an audition tape. "They were kind of pissed off," he said, of his parents. "But they were, like, 'Noah Baumbach is a legend.' " During callbacks, Baumbach asked Sam if his sister might want to audition to play his sister.

The Nivolas had played siblings before, in their mother's BBC miniseries, "The Pursuit of Love." Before getting cast, neither had read the dystopian Don DeLillo novel on which "White Noise" is based, so Mortimer read it to May as a bedtime story. To get the DeLillo-speak to sound natural, Baumbach drilled them on their lines while they shelled pistachios or played card games. Both recognized themselves in the script's surreal chatter. "Every family has, like, those random conversations where, as Noah said, it sounds like white noise," May explained. "Me and Sam being real siblings, we've had those conversations where we just talk in nonsense, kind of. That's a main theme of the movie—all the nonsense."

Many of their scenes take place in the family station wagon, so Sam decided to take May for a spin around his new neighborhood. "This is my little shitmobile," he said, getting into a parked Mercedes. "My parents got this car for, like, five hundred dollars on Craigslist." At the wheel, Sam told his sister, "I hope you haven't turned my room into some weird slumber-party zone."

"Don't worry," May said from the back seat. The siblings have been getting used to living apart. "Sometimes I'll be, like, I need Sam to argue with my parents and him to agree with me, because usually it'll be two against two," she said. "But now I'm outnumbered."

"This is where I have my science lectures," Sam announced. "We're learning about Einstein's theory of relativity, and pretty much learning that everything we've learned about science is total bullshit, and, like, nothing is real."

"I'm learning about density!" May called out.

Sam passed the building where he takes literature. "We've read the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, Plato. Sappho, who is awesome."

"We're reading Genesis!" May yelled.

Sam, who wants to direct, listed his favorite filmmakers: Leos Carax, Wyler, Fellini. His upcoming roles include Leonard Bernstein's son, in a bio-pic starring and directed by Bradley Cooper. People Sam's age tend to call children of the famous "nepo babies," but he didn't flinch at the term. "I totally take advantage of my parents' being actors, because I just try to learn as much as I can from them," he said. He parked and went on, "We've spent our whole lives following them to Budapest and South Africa." "White Noise," for which the Nivola kids stayed with their parents at a rental house in Cleveland, was a reversal. "They kept saying how they were like our stay-at-home wives," Sam said. "They'd be sitting at home all day, and then we'd come home from work, like, 'Ugh, we're so tired! Is dinner ready yet?' "

The siblings were off to meet their parents at a Columbia football game, so Sam headed back to his apartment to change into a school sweatshirt. "I have been developing some school spirit," he said. "Listen, I love the color baby blue." ♦

**By Anthony Lane**

**By Inkoo Kang**

**By Hannah Gold**

**By Andrew Marantz**

## The Theatre


- “KPOP” Makes an Uneasy Transition to Broadway

# “KPOP” Makes an Uneasy Transition to Broadway

Even when the scenes drag, the songs soar.

By [Helen Shaw]



The musical “KPOP” showcases a variety of modern music—emo meditations, house-inflected bangers, rap arias that transition quickly into dance music and reggaetón—but the through line is a certain audience-courting intensity. Of course it is: South Korean stars (and the companies that manage them) are known for manufacturing well-polished public personae and cultivating fervent fan communities. Will the Broadway version be able to create the required level of idolatry? Can you make Beatlemania on command? Most of the audience at the nearly in-the-round Circle in the Square has known the five-member girl group RTMIS (sounds like the Greek goddess), the eight-member boy band F8 (sounds like destiny), and the solo star MwE (pronounced “mwee”) only for as long as we’ve been sitting in the theatre. It’s therefore up to the book writer Jason Kim, the composer-lyricists Helen Park and Max Vernon, and the director Teddy Bergman to kindle the adulation of a thousand hours in a bit more than two. Let’s go!

Structurally, “KPOP” is a box of mirrors, tucking the vicissitudes of three musical groups into the “rehearsal” for the very concert we’re about to watch. RBY Entertainment’s determined C.E.O., Ruby (Jully Lee), has conceived a one-night-only event, intending to introduce her stable of performers to an American audience. At the camera taping the day before, she and the white director, Harry (Aubie Merrylees), soon run into trouble: Harry is chafing at a job that he feels is beneath his dignity—he sees himself as a documentarian—so he tries to pressure the K-popsters into confessing their doubts and fears on film. The newest member of F8, Brad (Zachary Noah Piser), seems to seize any opportunity to stand out from the rest of his group, and Harry’s attention swivels to him. But, when the obviously fragile MwE (played by the real-life K-pop star Luna) flees a run-through, sharky Harry smells blood. Using a willing cameraman, Harry shoots MwE’s private dressing-room confrontation with her taskmaster/substitute mother, Ruby, and projects it, without her permission, onto a huge screen onstage.

This is tried-and-true material: it’s a little bit “Dreamgirls,” a little bit “Gypsy,” a little bit “MJ the Musical” (Lynn Nottage also used the “invasive interview” setup), a little bit “Jersey Boys.” As sturdy as these supports are, though, “KPOP” frequently loses its footing. Despite some clever integrating of Korean and English text—even the program is bilingual—a lot of “KPOP” goes clunk. Line by line, some dramatic scenes feel like temp tracks that will get the real dialogue later, and the English song lyrics can sound like deliberate spoofs. In the upbeat opening song, the members of RTMIS and F8 sing, “This is my Korea / This is my story-a.”

But a critical mass of the audience is hungry for beautiful people singing K-pop, and collective exhilaration has its own logic. Waves of noise and excitement whirl around the theatre’s curved architecture, and a staggered observer can feel like an accelerated particle, carried along by forces beyond her comprehension.

If you saw the Off Broadway version in 2017, produced by Ars Nova with Ma-Yi Theatre Company and Woodshed Collective, it’s hard not to miss its inventiveness and heart. I was an unabashed fan and have followed news of the show since. (A friend of mine was then Ars Nova’s associate artistic director, and is the current production’s dramaturge.) Five years ago, “KPOP” submerged you in the process of becoming a Korean pop star:

audience members wandered around a hit-making factory (the A.R.T./New York complex standing in for a maze of studios and recording booths), eavesdropping on a plastic-surgery consultation, a gruelling dance class, a P.R. session. Kim conceived the intimate, interactive show with Woodshed—the immersive-theatre company behind "The Tenant" and "The Confidence Man"—where Bergman is the artistic director. Audience clusters saw different sequences in different orders, though MwE's character was still a focus; in a striking scene, the audience kept absolutely still as she sang in her boudoir, plaintive and alone.

New York audiences, enjoying themselves voyeuristically, were massaged into believing that they were somehow glimpsing a cultural underbelly, so they didn't realize, at first, that they were showing their own. By the end, though, a performer had turned to the theatregoers, asking why Korean music hadn't crossed over into the American mainstream. The answers we came up with at the time, or at least the ones my group was nudged toward, were "incuriosity," "racism," and "fear of a foreign language."

That entire innovative structure is gone. Half a decade is a generation in media terms, and, since 2017, Korean talent has revolutionized nearly every facet of global popular culture. (Even now, when K-pop superstars are selling out stadiums in America, there's still plenty of bias to point to. Where, for instance, is BTS's Grammy Award?) It's only natural, then, that Kim, Park, and Vernon's project has pivoted from audience-needling to a more booster-ish attitude. They have added a ton of songs, many of which are strong enough to stand alone. (This cast album should *sell;* the associated TikTok channels are already irresistible.) The show has also cranked up the production values: the lighting designer Jiyoun Chang and the projection designer Peter Nigrini turn the walls into volcanoes and star fields, and the choreographer Jennifer Weber's propulsive dances tap into a certain atavistic pleasure. The virtuoso costume designers Clint Ramos and Sophia Choi top themselves with every number until their dizzying, coördinated palettes grow almost too bright to look at. It helps, too, that many of the performers have actual experience in the trenches—Luna, of course, but also RTMIS's Min and BoHyung, who sang with Miss A and SPICA, respectively, and F8's de-facto leader, Kevin Woo, who is a former member of U-KISS. "KPOP" thus seems to have been reënvisioned as a warm celebration of the will to perfection. "We had no interest in this piece

being an exposé of any sort of the industry," Kim said in an interview with *Time*.

Well, his script seems to have *some* interest in it. For instance, there's the body-shaming, hypersexualizing stuff we glimpse in MwE's flashbacks. Both Ruby and a choreographer berate a thirteen-year-old MwE. "Now, move those tree trunk legs," Ruby barks. The choreographer (the always wonderful John Yi) complains, "Last week, I saw her eat a cake on her birthday." The upset adolescent's ensuing dance for "Wind Up Doll" is tonally troubling, with oddly erotic moves and lyrics like "You push the gear / Touch me that way. / You wind me up like clockwork / And I obey."

With MwE's story, Kim draws on the idea of *han*, which he defines in the script as "an intensity; a collective suffering that lingers at the edges of the Korean condition," and puts a crack in the fantasy that he and the other creators have worked so hard to develop. The (many, *many*) songs are supposed to be a way to forget the real world, to imagine a paradisiacal, sanitized place where costumes look like army gear or B.D.S.M. outfits but no one actually dies or has sex (at least, based on the preteen way the audience squealed at a kiss). It's the kind of laser-cut, power-washed heaven that only sacrifice and talent and a media-industrial behemoth can create. How sweet or inspiring is it, though, when we know that the thirteen-year-olds aren't allowed to eat cake?

In the final six songs, what was a play with music becomes a full-on concert: an electronic-pop anthem segues into MwE's Céline Dion-style ballad (wind machines emphasize that she is nailing hair-raisingly high notes), which dissolves into rock-fizz fantasia. The floor pulses brightly; then a gleaming silver-white light breaks like sunrise across the front row. This is what the show has wanted to do all along—cut its narrative tether. "Blast off!" the ensemble sings to the dancing audience, which is full of a specific, manic kind of love. "Now we're flyin' high through the sky."

I found myself watching Abraham Lim, one of the members of F8, who has an extraordinary tenor voice but barely any spoken lines. Ramos and Choi put him in some spectacular outfits, including a series of belted lounge jackets, which give him an air of impenetrable seventies cool. When the audience reaction stops the show, his surprised, overwhelmed delight—he

wipes away a tear—turns the key to the K-pop magic. What would it be like to make an icon feel the force of your love, to make him smile and cry? No wonder people scream. ♦

**By David Remnick**

**By Ian Crouch**

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